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THE WRITER'S RESPONSIBILITY

The
Writer's Responsibility

by
J. DONALD ADAMS

SECKER & WARBURG

1946

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FOR MY FATHER
James Adams
A MAN OF INTEGRITY

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I bid you to a one-man revolution—
The only revolution that is coming

—ROBERT FROST

FOREWORD

THIS book derives from the profound conviction that literature, during the years immediately ahead, will seek above all else to restore the dignity of the human spirit. The urge to reflect that quest and aim, and, if possible, to give it direction, has already shown itself in the work of writers of several countries. It is an impetus which now rapidly gathers momentum, and the forces which contribute to it will, I believe, soon prove irresistible. The day of an untempered naturalism is dead, though there are writers, and able ones, who still practise it; and thus, too, is the day of man's degradation dead, as he has revealed it in his books; there is breaking over literature, I believe, the first light of a new dawn of hope and will. We are moving forward into a new realism in which vision and aspiration will be joined with fact.

Late in 1932 there appeared in France a book afterwards published here under the title *Journey to the End of the Night*. This novel by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, written in a powerfully naturalistic style, gave ultimate expression, for our time, to man's disgust with man. It was difficult to see, as one read it, why any man should take the trouble to write such a book in preference to blowing out his brains. As I write, the news is published that Céline has allied himself with the Nazi elements in France; there could be, for him, no other course than to place himself on the side of those who have denied and done their best to destroy the human spirit.

Céline's book stands as the symbol on one side of the coin of that intellectual currency which we are now discarding; on the other is stamped the title *Finnegans Wake*, the work on which was squandered the declining genius of James Joyce. One stands for the apotheosis of our negation, the other for the temporary enthronement of the esoteric. They represent the ultimate

expression of two main trends which operated powerfully in the literature of our time, and which are now definitely in the period of their decline. Literature is turning now towards affirmation, by signs so numerous they cannot be ignored; and it is turning, too, in common with all the arts, away from the preferences of the self-appointed few, and towards the needs and desires of the many.

The whole structure of life as we have known it has been subjected, and is still being subjected, in this time of profound change, to the impact of tremendous destructive forces. It is but a little while since the civilization of which we are the inheritors was seriously threatened from without; let us not forget that if the external danger is now nearly past, we are still threatened from within, for the forces which produced their most visible and potent threat in the persons of Hitler and Tojo were not generated by these particular men and their associates, who were merely the more dreadful symptoms of a sickness which infected nearly all our world. They were the products of a spiritual bankruptcy which many among ourselves have declared, and against which we have still to wage unceasing battle.

Whatever lies in the immediate future, the world in which we are to live will be a different world from that we knew. Not only do we see that many of our institutions, much of our political and social structure, must undergo deep-seated change; we see as well that there is also need for an equally far-reaching alteration in the values by which our lives must be lived in the new time that is being born. We have begun to realize that the crisis to which we have come has been, in large measure, one of our own making; had it not been so, the forces of destruction could never have reached the strength they did.

These are also times in which we must count among our dangers the fact that for the moment we are impelled to regard as unimportant, in the face of the practical issues of war and reconstruction which confront us, those creative activities which the presently insistent needs of our situation may lead us to sub-

ordinate. But we cannot afford to neglect, at any time, the abiding values which are represented by the culture for which we have been fighting. If those values are to survive, if they are to be fortified and renewed, as they need to be, they must be guarded and nourished.

The literature of disillusionment and despair, in which the novel was the most widely effective instrument during the past quarter-century, contributed much to the breaking down of those values and put nothing in their place. Our young writers came not merely to question the meaning of such abstractions as love, honour, loyalty, patriotism, and every other manifestation of the spirit, which in itself was a good and healthy thing; they came actively to distrust and to reject the qualities themselves. Our scepticism was not followed through to that new and deeper understanding which should be the ultimate aim, as it is the only justification, of the sceptical approach. An intelligent, *responsible* scepticism is a mighty weapon in the advancement of the human spirit, but ours lost direction and grew to feed upon itself.

Hand in hand with this spiritual poverty went a corresponding poverty of method in the novel. (I am for the moment letting the novel stand for literature because, since the time of its maturity, it has more rapidly and more sensitively reflected the temper of its time than any other literary medium.) This poverty of method (apart from bizarre excursions of an esoteric kind) was in part the product of the state of mind induced by lost or insufficient values. It was also a byproduct of our tardiness—and I am speaking now of American fiction—in going through the phase of naturalism in the novel—a phase which the French, who were its instigators, had almost done with by the time it became dominant in our own serious fiction. Within the last decade we have seen naturalism, in the form of a photographic realism, arrive at its dead-end in our fiction. There was nowhere else to go. Nothing remained but the search for new material—the exploitation of fresh backgrounds.

It was a method sterile at the core because, while using as its

material something as living and dynamic as human relations, it ignored the factor of moral conflict. It treated men and women as automata. The novelist, in many instances, permitted the characters whom he created no responses to the world about them other than those induced by their sensory perceptions. The writer committed to this approach denies himself the right to clarify and give meaning to the experience which he is recording. It is an attitude which has led to too great an emphasis on the exterior life of human beings, even when they are, as in so many novels of the last two decades, human beings of a low order, in whom any sort of inner life is only feebly and infrequently evident. But, as Mary Colum has excellently said in *From These Roots*,

Even the most meanly gifted of human beings have a life of dream, though it be the narrowest, most limited dream, a dream of marrying the boss's daughter or being the head of the office. But whatever it may be, while it lasts it takes up a great deal of each life, sometimes to the extent of nearly obliterating the life of external reality. It is one of the objects of art to mould this life of dream, to shape it into forms that will enable men and women to achieve a greater consciousness, a profounder communication with life, stronger feelings, subtler intelligences, more noble imaginations. . . . Just as surely as time is composed of night and day, life is composed of dream and external reality, and the advancement and happiness of man depend not only on the elevation of his everyday life, but on the elevation of his dream-life as well.

We shall hear more of this "life of dream" in the creative literature of the immediate future. It must be so, if that literature is to have any real meaning for us in our time. We have for many years been proceeding on the shallow assumption that man's advancement and happiness were to be secured simply through the elevation of his everyday life; even now we are not too far from the belief that a chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage, with a helicopter besides, in that post-war world

of mechanical marvels which we so impatiently await, will set life right for us, within and without. Fortunately, not a few among us (though who knows if they are enough?), and particularly in the generation whose world this is to be, are aware that we had been grasping after a fool's paradise. They know that unless we set the values of the spirit beside and above the material comforts that we crave, we might better have bowed our heads to the New Order of the Nazis. We shall not find what we are looking for through the magic of technology; we must not believe that by putting trust in some collectivist formula we can be relieved of the burden of individual responsibility. The central problem of our time starts from within, and it must be approached from the inside out. It is because I deeply believe this to be so that I have used as an opening chord for this book the two lines from Robert Frost which appear opposite the first page of this Foreword:

I bid you to a one-man revolution—
The only revolution that is coming.

As poets sometimes do, he speaks there, I think, with that profound penetration so often denied to more practical and hence more opportunistic minds.

A change, the signs of which, as we shall see, are already evident, has recently touched the novel, as it has touched poetry and other forms of literature. Its effects will deepen and widen. Nor will that change consist simply in a lessening of emphasis upon the life of external reality. It will sweep away—is already sweeping away—the mood of negation which has dominated the novel, as it has dominated nearly every other form of literature, since the close of World War I. The attitude of mind which produced the debunking era in biography, and out of which came the cynical, wise-cracking play and the novel in which the characters lived without values of their own or their author's, was first replaced by a questing attitude, best reflected, perhaps, by the deluge of three-generation stories about the American past.

It is now being followed by expressions of a more definite commitment to belief of one sort or another; it is showing itself by the re-emergence in our fiction of characters who hold within themselves values that are positive and who know that life gives as well as takes. We are being given in fiction, as in biography, more characters whom we can actually respect and admire.

Much of what we have mistaken for positive strength in the fiction of recent years has been merely brutality. It has been one more symptom of the sickness which possessed us—an indication of weakness and confusion, not of strength. It will pass as surely as the brittle cleverness generated in the 'twenties is already falling to pieces. There is nothing there to feed the human spirit, and because that is so, it cannot endure. We shall not wear blinkers or rose-coloured glasses in the years that are ahead, but we shall look up as well as down.

It is the purpose of this book to trace the steps by which American literature arrived at the point where we now find it; it will be my aim, in the pages that follow, to assess the value, for American literature and life, of what was accomplished in the period now ending, and to suggest the likely lines of that literature's development during the immediate future. I believe it to be on the verge of a new renaissance comparable in vigour to that which was ushered in by the second decade of the present century, but one which is more soundly based and healthier in its attitudes than was the literature which preceded it.

J. D. A.

New York

11 June 1944

CHAPTER ONE

CERTAIN ASSUMPTIONS

I

I HAVE sometimes thought it would be helpful if the writer of every book which undertakes to establish a critical position, whether in literature or any other of the arts, in economics or in any other branch of human activity, were to begin, not only by defining those general terms which he must needs employ, but also by making clear the nature of such personal bases and even such personal biases as he feels are likely to colour his opinions. So far as I am able, I shall try to do precisely that in this opening chapter.

No writer, whether critic or creator, is able to maintain an absolute detachment. I suppose that no mind of our age has more determinedly sought or more nearly attained such a detachment than that of George Santayana, and yet no attentive reader of *Persons and Places* can fail to be aware that Santayana's scepticism and his profound but stoical pessimism had their roots in the confused, unhappy background of his earliest years. In his determination to find compensations for the ugliness and discord in which reality thrust itself upon him, he turned to the pursuit of the ideal and to the cultivation of detachment. He built for himself a bulwark against life which was at the same time a height from which to observe it. But powerful and subtle though his reason was, it could never be wholly separated from the emotional conditioning to which he was subjected as a child.

It follows then, I think, that even our conception of what literature should be is in some part determined by our personal needs and desires; and these, in turn, are partly the product of what our reading was like in the most deeply impressionable

years, as they are also, naturally, further influenced by mature experience and reflection. It is my intention, therefore, to set down as briefly and as clearly as I can what I believe the function of literature to be, and what are the elements, as I see them, which make it a valuable supplement to living, as well as those which tend to impair and even to nullify its value.

Because this book is to concern itself chiefly with American creative literature and, moreover, with the literature of the past quarter-century, it will deal principally with the work that has been done in fiction and poetry. It will do this for the reason that it is in these fields that the most notable writing was done; and it will give particular emphasis to the novel because literature in that form has borne the closest relation to American life. Accordingly, in this preliminary chapter I shall have something to say about what seem to me to be the essential elements of both fiction and poetry which fulfil what I take to be the function of literature on its best level.

So much for the ground which I propose to cover in these introductory pages. Before I proceed further I shall set down a few definitions of terms it is my intention to use either here or in the body of the book.

I have already used the term "creative literature." By that I mean a piece of writing, whether in prose or poetry, which makes imaginative use of experience, either felt or observed, or both. And when I say "observed," I mean impressions recorded through the senses, of whatever nature; that is, the experience may be either of life itself, or of its reflection in books or in any other visible or audible manifestations of man's thought. Thus criticism itself can be creative literature if it makes imaginative use, in the form of propulsive ideas, of the material which it observes.

Two of the most troublesome terms employed in critical writing are "realism" and "naturalism." They are troublesome because they are so often vaguely and loosely used. Since I shall have frequent need of them, I shall be at some pains to make clear precisely what I intend them to convey.

"Realism" is one of those many-faceted words which carry all sorts of special meanings with them, so that it is hard to find a central, essential meaning. One popular conception of realism as applied to fiction (which is where I shall use it) is that it consists simply in the use of the photographic method. Another is that realistic fiction makes a deliberate choice of the commonplace in its quest for material—fiction that treats of the everyday life of everyday people. Still another conceives of realism as signifying the use of unpleasant material. The trouble with all these conceptions of realism is, of course, that they are only partial conceptions. Realism can and should be more than photography, if it is to get below the surface of life. Realism may or may not deal with the commonplace, because not all of life is commonplace; it may or may not deal with what is unpleasant, because life has both its sordid and its noble aspects, both of which it is the business of the writer to record. A good many years ago Professor Bliss Perry, in *A Study of Prose Fiction*, which is in many respects still an admirable book, framed a definition which is reasonably inclusive. It was this: "Realistic fiction is that which does not shrink from the commonplace or the unpleasant in its effort to depict things as they are, life as it is." I can think of none clearer or more fully embracing.

"Naturalism," while it adopts the central attitude of realism, imposes other attitudes upon it. Above all, it imposes a definitely pessimistic bias. Naturalism, as fathered by Zola, accepted scientific determinism *in toto* and proceeded from the premiss that you could chart a man's progress in society as accurately and dispassionately as a physician can chart your metabolism. In his own words, "Imagination has no longer a place. . . . You simply take the life study of a person or a group of persons, whose actions you faithfully depict. The work becomes a report, nothing more; it has but the merit of exact observation, of more or less profound penetration and analysis, of the logical connection of facts." In Zola's theory of a scientific fiction, "You start from the point that nature is sufficient, that you must accept it as it is, without

modification or pruning; it is grand enough, beautiful enough, to supply its own beginning, its middle and its end." Thus he threw overboard those basic principles in art, the principles of selection and arrangement, which apply to a novel as much as to a painting. He allowed nothing for that alchemy of the artist by which the thing observed is not only merely reported but interpreted so that we see it in its true significance.

The naturalist, looking at life, sees the cards stacked against the individual. He conceives of man as the hapless prey of forces greater than himself and completely beyond his control. Inevitably, this conviction influences him in his representation of character. Frequently he chooses people of strong animal natures, as Frank Norris, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser did. Because of his preoccupation with animal impulses, the naturalist is likely to *keep* his characters on an animal plane. As George Meredith once put it, "The naturalist sees the hog in nature, and takes nature for the hog."

Occasional use will also be made in these pages of the terms "objective" and "subjective" as applied to writing. There can be little disagreement as to the precise meaning of these terms, and it would be difficult to improve upon the definitions offered by the Oxford Dictionary. "Objective," in its application to the arts, is there defined as "treating of outward things or events; treating a subject so as to exhibit the actual facts, not coloured by the feelings or the opinions of the writer." "Subjective" is defined as "expressing, bringing into prominence, or deriving its material mainly from, the individuality of the artist or author."

There are certain words, of which "romantic" is one, which are impossible to define with sufficient clarity and comprehensiveness so that they can be used without objection in any one of their several applications. In the case of "romantic," Jacques Barzun, in his provocative and illuminating *Romanticism and the Modern Ego*, has profitably devoted an entire section of his book to a clarification of its various meanings and uses. As used here, "romantic" as an adjective will signify merely the kind of literature

which avoids by intention, or misses through a sentimentalized approach, a genuine reflection of life. I may have occasion, in speaking of certain writers, to use the term "romantic realist," and by that I shall mean a writer who, while endeavouring to present life faithfully, at the same time permits his reading of it to be coloured by his or his characters' conception of what life might be, as opposed to what it actually is.

So much for definitions, and I turn now to the matter of my own personal bases and such biases as I can discover within myself which may affect the views put forth in this book.

2

First, as to the function of literature. Since we are to be concerned here almost exclusively with fiction and poetry, I shall not venture into that no-man's-land whither any consideration of what the bounds of literature are would take us. But I think it might be well if we were to accept at once the existence of two kinds of literature: that which aims merely to entertain—and obviously this can be done on the level of art—and that which undertakes as well to widen and deepen our understanding of life. I am not for a moment trying to suggest that literature on its highest level must or should be directly didactic; adults, as much as children, prefer to be improved by indirection. But that the great creative works are, however obliquely, also lamps for the wayfarer, it would, I think, be silly to deny; or that the greatest burn with the clearest flame. And it is in this respect, I believe, that the literature of our age—and I mean the literature of the twentieth century—has distinguished itself the least. Literature serves us best and makes its greatest contribution to life when it not only delights us, by its form, its precision and beauty of expression, and the interest of its content, but leaves us wiser as well. And it is because we more often find in poetry than in any other form of literature the ultimate wisdom of which man is capable, as well as the utmost delight which literature can

give, that it has been properly regarded as the highest form of literature.

What, now, of those elements in literature which can make it so valuable a supplement to living? I should place first of all its capacity to enhance the joy of living. It is perfectly true that men can be happy without books and, indeed, an excellent case could be made for the argument that they would be far happier creatures to-day if the art of printing had never been born. It was Carlyle who said that books "are like men's souls, divided into sheep and goats. Some few are going up, and carrying us up, heavenward; calculated, I mean, to be of priceless advantage in teaching, in forwarding the teaching of all generations. Others, a frightful multitude, are going down, down; doing ever the more and the wider and the wilder mischief." And Disraeli once spoke of them as "the curse of the human race." But along with their infinite capacity for harm, their blessings have been manifold, and of these none has been more precious than their quickening of our response to life.

The greatest writers have been lovers of mankind, lovers of life. I believe with Van Wyck Brooks that "this mood of health, will, courage, faith in human nature, is the dominant mood in the history of literature," and that "writers will always return to it as water always rises to the level of its source." Never before as now, I suppose, have men felt so deeply and so strongly the *need* for belief in man and man's capacity. And nowhere, surely, can that belief be better fostered and more effectively maintained than in the books men write. Here, to my mind, lie the greatest responsibility and the greatest opportunity which writers have in our time. We have for years past been too much concerned with the *opinions* reflected in our creative writing, with the reactions, or the lack of them, of our poets and novelists to the problems by which we are confronted. In relation to the enduring values of literature, the opinions which writers hold with regard to specific problems are of little importance. Their opinions matter much more in their lives as citizens than in their work as creative artists.

To pause for a single illustration: nothing in the critical attitudes of the years just behind us has been sillier and more irrelevant than the contemptuous neglect of Kipling as an artist because of his imperialistic politics. What if he was a Tory? What if his attitude towards the white man's burden was not consonant with the trend of our sympathies and thought to-day? Kipling did not sit in Downing Street; his principality was, and is, the wide, uncharted world of the imagination. He had the gift of magic, both in prose and verse, to a degree granted to but few men of his generation. Who to-day can write a story fit to place, in its genre, beside "The Man Who Would Be King" or "The Brushwood Boy"? Where is his match as a ballad-maker? How many writers have his magnificent feeling for words? It has been one of the most significant and heartening shifts in the literary current that has brought us T. S. Eliot's defence of and selections from his verse, and which promises a similar selection by another contemporary master, Somerset Maugham, of his stories. Our ideologies have too often made us blind.

Max Eastman once remarked of poetry that it "is unconditionally upon the side of life." That is, it seems to me, a deeply true and suggestive observation, and one which applies not to poetry alone, but to the best in all creative literature. At first sight, since literature and life are so commonly coupled in our minds, this may seem a little like the elaboration offered by President Coolidge when questioned about the sermon he had just heard. Asked what the preacher's subject was, he said, "Sin," and when prodded as to the preacher's views, remarked, "He was against it." Yet, though life is the primary material of literature, not all literature is upon the side of life. Mr. Eastman further observes that poetry is unlike ennui, or sophistication, and so it is. They are fundamentally incompatible, except in what we call light verse, whose principal stock-in-trade sophistication has always been. And literature in general, unless it approaches life with something of the eagerness and ready receptiveness which are the springs of poetry, lacks the power to invigorate and restore.

For the books we love best are the books that reveal a love of life. We react to them as we react to people. When we say that a man is a likeable rascal we disapprove of his principles, or his lack of them, but we pay tribute to his zest for living. We forgive a great deal in those who reinforce in us the belief that life is full, adventurous, rewarding, just as we are impatient with those who take away from its savour. For example, it was not merely the prevalence of wilful obscurity which cut down the audience for poetry during recent years. In part, it was also the fact that so much of what was written was either whining, snarling, or apathetic in its response to life. It has been pointed out that a sense of loss haunts every other poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay during the period when she was the most widely read of living American poets. Yet the insistence of such a mood did not alienate her readers. That she made herself easily understood, that she could always communicate her feeling, is not, I believe, a complete explanation of her popularity, any more than that she spoke to youth of youth's disillusion. Does it not lie rather in the fact that, to a greater degree than any other lyric poet of her generation, her lines had the quality of poignancy? Looking upon beauty or remembering rapture might make her sad, so that she could write,

I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that sings in me no more.

What mattered was that her perception of the beauty, her memory of the rapture, was not dulled, but tinglingly alive. For what I am saying is not that poetry, or literature in general, must be joyous in its total effect. If we were to insist upon that, we should have to rule out a great part of what we prize most highly in the books which have won for themselves enduring life. Out of the contrast between what was and what is, or between what is and what might have been, have come some of the most profoundly moving and deeply stimulating utterances in both prose and poetry. I mean simply that the literature in which we find

the fullest satisfaction is the literature in which we find the fullest reaction to life. Naturally, those in whom the love of life is strongest suffer the keenest disappointments, feel most intensely the contrasts of which I have just been speaking, and this susceptibility is imparted to what they write. We like to be in their company because they bring to us the feeling of abundant living. They revive and quicken our own response to life. They are like those people of whom Thomas Wolfe wrote:

There are some people who have the quality of richness and joy in them and they communicate it to everything they touch. It is first of all a physical quality; then it is a quality of the spirit. . . . It is probably the richest resource of the spirit; it is better than all formal learning, and it cannot be learned, although it grows in power and richness with living. It is full of wisdom and repose, since the memory and contrast of pain and labour are in it. . . . People who have this energy of joy and delight draw other people to them as bees are drawn to ripe plums. Most people have little power for living in themselves, they are pallid and uncertain in their thoughts and feelings, and they think they can derive the strength, the richness and the character they lack from one of these vital and decisive people.

Is it not partly the enormous vitality of a writer like Shakespeare or Tolstoy that makes our reading of him so inexhaustibly rewarding? Life streams out from them. Both were men who knew the summits of joy and the depths of misery; in Shakespeare's case we know the range of his emotional experience only through its reflection in his work, but it is there for all men to see; Tolstoy has written directly of his, but even if he had not, the quality of his intense reaction to life is implicit in *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*, as it is, indeed, in nearly everything that he wrote. The great novels, like the great poems, have a tonic effect. They not only reach out towards life and grasp it; they also pass it on.

Another element for which I look in literature is the presence of what might be described as reflective observation. A great

part of our recent writing has been merely reportorial—and I am not thinking of the topical books, many of them excellent, which we have had in such great abundance, but of creative writing. Even our poetry has too often been content to be no more than reportorial. Our books have been crammed with observation, packed with fact, loaded, often, with opinion. But that is not what I have in mind when I find them so often vital but thin, stimulating but not illuminating. I mean the absence of fruitful reflection on the life which they report. It is the kind of quality which makes a writer like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry so refreshing among our contemporaries. He is a good reporter, too, and has written more vividly of flight than anyone save Anne Lindbergh, who has the same quality. As you read him you have more than a picture, more than a communicated sense of what the night flight to Arras was like; you have a meditative mind searching for meaning in his experience. Now and then he uncovers a shining bit of truth, and of a writer who can do that we ask nothing better.

3

Obvious as are some of the elements which, it seems to me, contribute to the basic values in literature, I believe them to be worth stressing because, in these muddled years through which we have been living, they have been so often overlooked. For example, I believe passionately in the writer's obligation to communicate—to transfer from his mind to ours what he is trying to say as clearly, as forcibly, as briefly as it lies within his power to do. Men have experimented with words ever since they began to put them together, and will do so, no doubt, as long as they continue to obey the impulsion to express themselves. Their experiments have enormously varied and enriched our power of communication by the written word; yet we have, during recent years, seen experimentation with language as a tool of literature disregard completely its fundamental purpose—the transmission of emotion, thought, experience.

What I have in mind, of course, are the amazing labours in the experimental field of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. Here were two acute minds, one of which, at least, was buttressed by a remarkable erudition, trying to extend, as they thought, the boundaries of man's expression, when, as a matter of fact, the logical end-all of their work was the extinction of communication. A good deal of nonsense has been written about what the young American writers who sat at Gertrude Stein's feet in Paris learned from her in fashioning for themselves a direct and simple modern style. Much has been made of how Miss Stein made evident the value of repetition, as if that were not one of the oldest bits of artifice known to skilful writers of prose, and one never more effectively employed than it was by the men who wrote the King James version of the Bible. There was nothing that Gertrude Stein's pretentious and empty sing-song had to teach that her protégés could not already have discovered for themselves in the masters of English prose. And Joyce? He was, undeniably, a man of great gifts, unfortunately turned to essentially destructive and disintegrating ends. It was tragic that the last years of his life, and all his learning, should have been devoted to the production of *Finnegans Wake*, which, when all is said and done, is a mockery of what the English tongue has accomplished through centuries of communicated thought. Those who heard him read aloud specimen pages from that fantastic work will tell you that unless you have had that privilege, the full beauty of what he accomplished in *Finnegans Wake* must be for ever denied you. Nor, we are assured by the book's commentators, can its full meaning be gathered unless you have, in adequate measure, Joyce's own erudition, in languages, in mythology, in all the knowledge from which he drew. Shall we, then, be content to be lulled by the mere euphonious linking of sounds, or, if we wish to penetrate the purpose behind them, devote our years to preparatory study for the reception of its wisdom? The greatest books in man's history have not demanded this of us; what is Joyce's profound and irreplaceable con-

tribution to human living that we should make of him an exception?

It seems to me preposterous that a creative work, of whatever magnitude, should need to be approached by way of what its first detailed commentators describe as "a *skeleton key*" running to 365 pages. Do we demand a similar preliminary exposition as a requisite, or even as an aid, to the appreciation of the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven, or of Chartres Cathedral, of the great Greek tragedies, of *Hamlet* or of *Lear*, of Goethe's *Faust*, of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*? Is it not merely the separation in time that requires some special knowledge and preparation for the full appreciation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, crammed as it is with allusions to the politics, the theology, and the cosmogony of its age? But Joyce wrote in and of our own time; what did he gain, and wherein was he justified, in erecting this complex and even, by its admirers, admittedly difficult barrier to the comprehension of his theme?

Messrs. Campbell and Robinson tell us that *Finnegans Wake* is "a mighty allegory of the fall and resurrection of mankind"; at the lowest estimate, they believe, it is "a huge time-capsule, a complete and permanent record of our age. If our society should go to smash to-morrow (which, as Joyce implies, it may) one could find all the pieces, together with the forces that broke them, in *Finnegans Wake*." And, they assure us, the book is above all else "an essay in permanence. From its perspective, the hopeful or fearful may learn to behold with a vast sympathy the prodigious upsurging and dissolution of forms, the continual transvaluation of values, the inevitable ambiguities, which are the stuff of life and history. Through notes that finally become tunable to our ears, we hear James Joyce uttering his resilient, all-enjoying, all-animating 'Yes,' the Yes of things yet to come, a Yes from beyond every zone of disillusionment, such as few have had the heart to utter."

I confess that I have as yet lacked the patience, in spite of repeated forays, to give to *Finnegans Wake* the undivided and un-

sparing attention which it would seem to demand. If, as its commentators insist, its underlying note, in spite of its unblinking scrutiny of all the sicknesses of our time, "is one of positive affirmation," a vital recognition of the unending polarity of life, of its continuous rebirth and renewal, then its author is one more voice on the side of the angels. But even granted that, it seems to me that Joyce buried his "Yes" in a smother of needless complexity, that his experimentation with language had its logical end in the negation of language. I think that much of the play with words which has so greatly delighted his admirers was essentially a perverse and childish play, heavy and awkward in its humour, and needlessly befogging to his sense. I think that he made some of the most inexcusable puns that ever were spoken or penned. Why bother to write, "as tough as the oak trees (peats be with them!)" or "Suffoclose" for Sophocles, or "Shikespower" for Shakespeare? It is puerile. Messrs. Campbell and Robinson tell us that Joyce "had to smelt the modern dictionary back to protean plasma and re-enact 'the genesis and mutation of language' in order to deliver his message." I think that is drivel. It would be as intelligent to insist that man must himself be smelted back to protean slime in order to understand himself. If you set out to portray a disintegrating world, as Joyce did, you can do it only by a greater clarity and a firmer synthesis than you would need for the opposite purpose; nor can you effectively plumb the depths of man's unconscious, as Joyce tried to do, merely by an attempted reproduction of the unconscious, for the reproduction must necessarily be as chaotic as the original. Joyce could have remembered with profit the maxim of Coleridge that "a poem may in one sense be a dream but it must be a waking dream."

To my mind, *Finnegans Wake* and its zealous interpreters represent the ultimate in literary snobbery. It is the death-rattle of an age, as much as *Journey to the End of the Night*, and it cannot speak for or to the age upon which we are entering. In Henry Wallace's happy phrase, "the age of the common man" will have

no truck with the tiresome prestidigitators of words. Their arsenal is empty, and the echoing criticism which they fathered is dead.

To step for a moment from language itself to the manner and temper of its use—in other words, to speak of style. We all know that its prevailing character changes from period to period. The Elizabethans, the seventeenth century, the eighteenth, the Victorians, and ourselves, have each a distinctive flavour perceptible in the majority of writers. Yet certain fundamentals are common to the writing that is best in all these periods: clarity, grace, and force. I doubt if there can be a wholly satisfying style, whatever the particular qualities of its period, which does not possess all three. Other qualities may be added—conciseness, for example, or logic, or imagination, which increase its power or beauty—but the first three seem to me essential, whatever the material upon which they are employed.

And in this respect, I think, the period in which we live is fortunate. We are impatient with fustian; if we are unduly contemptuous of rhetoric—for it can be, in expert hands, an extraordinarily effective tool, as Mr. Churchill has recently taught us—we place a proper value upon directness and simplicity, and we respect the sinewy sentence far more than the florid phrase. The latter, indeed, is instantaneously suspect among us. Our faults lie rather in the direction of looseness and lack of precision; much of our writing is careless, both in thought and execution. But it comes more and more, here in the United States, to have a native rhythm, though I believe it is easy to make too much of the distinctions which may be drawn between the typical English and the typical American style, just as in the case of speech among the two peoples; the best in both have more in common than in opposition.

Finally, I believe, as I have already indicated in the Foreword to this volume, that there rests now upon literature a particular obligation. As I conceive it, that obligation is to assist in restoring the dignity of the human spirit. Man needs desperately to re-

discover himself, to renew his faith in his destiny, to find something like a straight path in the complex maze of the modern world. As Henry C. Link has justly observed, "as his intellectual horizon has widened so his spiritual horizon has shrunk," and he needs as never before to be "freed from the crippling fallacies of the intellect." He has rationalized himself into such a state of bewilderment that it is no wonder he has sought refuge in the mirage created by various collective ideals, trying restlessly to find outside himself, in complete self-submergence by the State, the help which he must find within. Writers have contributed as much as, if not more than, any other group to the mood of negation and despair which has gripped our world. They can play as large a part in its reorientation and its constructive effort, and I believe they not only can but will, for they have already begun.

4

What, now, of those elements in literature which, as I see it, tend to nullify and destroy its value as a supplement to living? Most of them, as the opposites of the positive qualities of which I have been speaking, are implicit in what I have already said: disgust with life; inability or disinclination to clarify its meanings for us; confusion of what is temporarily interesting or provoking with what is of abiding importance; inability or disinclination to make an adequate transference of thought or emotion from writer to reader. All of these we shall find to have been predominantly active elements in the literature of the period which this book undertakes to examine. And correspondingly, we shall see their opposites emerging in the literature now in process of formation.

There is, however, one tendency, normally current in time of crisis, which has a deterrent effect upon creative writing, and which, since our participation in the war, has been particularly evident in the United States. It is the tendency among critics, and among creative writers as well, to speak or think of what is

unsatisfactorily called "the literature of escape" in terms of opprobrium. Actually, all literature, whether on the level of entertainment or of concern with those values which shine above and far outlast wars and revolutions of whatever magnitude, and whether written in time of crisis or during the happy interludes of man's history, provides quite legitimately, and without the slightest need for apology, an avenue of escape. For is not literature one of the means, and one of the most effective means, by which we escape from life into a wider life? I must confess I think the British have been wiser than ourselves in this matter of what it is fitting to write and to read in crucial times. They have endured tensions, anxieties, deprivations, and horrors at home which we have known only through the cold medium of print or screen, but they have taken a very common-sense attitude towards "escape literature"; we, on the other hand, have been much readier to give way to hysteria.

However grave the issues by which a nation is confronted, however effective some writers may be in writing books which are actual weapons in winning the war and planning the peace, there is both a place and a need for books that have no direct or even remote connection with the struggle, but which either rest or elevate the spirit. Whether it be a mystery story or a great poem which, in the foulness of our present world, can find the eternal springs of beauty and truth, there should be no apology necessary for either writing or reading it. Some writers make good propagandists and good reporters, whose functions are so valuable in days like those through which we have been living, and others find it more difficult to make an easy and effective transference of their abilities. They should be open to no reproach; all we can ask of them is that they serve their talents to the best of their capacity.

Suppose, for example, that Jane Austen, whose lifetime embraced the American war for independence, the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte (and thus the threat of England's invasion)—momen-

tous events to which there are in her novels only the most distant references—had applied herself to a series of books conceived out of an acute sense of contemporaneity. How much we would have been the losers thereby! Knowing what we do of her interests and capacities, it seems reasonable to assume that she could have added little to our understanding of the events through which she lived, or that she could to any appreciable extent have affected the course they took. She must wisely have decided that her gifts lay not in the fields of politics and ideologies, but in the less fluid realm of human nature and conduct. We may be thankful that she did, and chose rather to direct the shafts of her wit against the absurdities of the male ego and those other human peccadilloes upon which she cast so shrewd an eye.

5

A little, now, in the way of such personal conditioning as may have contributed to the attitudes towards literature which I have set forth in the preceding pages. Our standards and tastes in books derive mainly, I think, from the early literary and educational influences to which we have been exposed. These, of course, may be, and usually are, modified by the character of our subsequent participation in life, but the imprint of those first influences is seldom, if ever, erased.

Books, I suppose, have been the main concern of the greater part of my adolescent and adult life, and yet I have never been an insatiable reader. I should be restless and unsatisfied, I know, if I were deprived of the opportunity to read over a long period of time; I have never, since I read my first book, *Robinson Crusoe*, at the age of seven, gone without reading for a period longer than a few months. But I long ago discovered that I have a saturation point beyond which books, however good, begin to pall. The antidote is simple and unfailing: two or three weeks of outdoor activity, and the jaded appetite is restored. But I have never found in books an adequate substitute for direct experience; aside

from my professional concern with them, they cannot be more than a valuable supplement to living.

One's first experience of any kind is likely to have a sharper tang than those of a similar sort which come after. Certainly nothing in a book encountered since has sent a keener tingle down my spine than Crusoe's discovery of the footprint in the sand, just as no fish I have caught in the many years after has elated me more than the seven-inch trout I pulled from a mountain brook at the age of twelve. Yet, so far as reading goes, this is not wholly so; certain poems, certain passages in long-familiar books, yield as keen a pleasure now as when I first read them. And then, too, so much depends upon one's inner weather whenever a known experience is repeated; we have all had moments when it was better than ever before.

Somehow, some of the best of children's books escaped me until long after I was grown. I never read *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Jungle Books* and the *Just So Stories*, or *The Wind in the Willows*, until I read them aloud to my daughter, and then it was a question which of the two enjoyed them more. I never could get on with *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and I remember feeling slightly ashamed of my liking for *Little Women* until I read, or was told, that it had been a favourite book of Theodore Roosevelt; if the Apostle of the Strenuous Life could confess such an interest, why, then, so could I! All that I could find about the American Indian I read with avidity, and that is an interest which has continued. There were, I remember, three brown-backed volumes called *The Deerfoot Stories*, by Edward S. Ellis, for which I had a particular affection, but I am afraid that Mr. Ellis's Deerfoot was a highly romanticized Indian. All that I can remember of him now is that he was converted by the Moravians and came to his end a gentle and very devout Christian.

In common with most boys of my generation, I devoured in wholesale fashion the tales of G. A. Henty. I think it can justly be said of them that they quickened the historical imagination; a lot of sound work went into Henty's stories, and he had a true

narrative sense and a vivid pen; forty years afterwards his description of the Black Hole of Calcutta in *With Clive in India* remains sharp in my mind. The Horatio Alger rags-to-riches stories I found only mildly stimulating, and towards Oliver Optic's smug and sanctimonious young prigs I felt an instinctive aversion. D'Artagnan was the boy; he made you feel alive in every fibre.

I share Clifton Fadiman's conviction that the so-called trash read by youngsters thirty or forty years ago—the paper-covered yarns about Frank Merriwell and Diamond Dick Brady and the rest, which we consumed in defiance of the parental edict—was better fare than the corresponding trash of to-day, which is meekly, if protestingly, countenanced by the majority of parents. As Mr. Fadiman remarked in his Introduction to *Reading I've Liked*, they were better written and not entirely unrelated to the child's experience, as are the exploits of Superman and other creations of what, for some incomprehensible reason, are called "the comics." Those stories of an earlier day increased, as Mr. Fadiman argued, the child's general awareness, and provided "admittedly rough paradigms of character, motivation, life experience."

I agree also that too many of to-day's more pretentious juveniles are written by authors who are very much interested in children and not sufficiently interested in themselves. They are "made" books, built to a preconceived pattern of what is good for the child. Mr. Fadiman is right when he says that *Little Women*, which conquers each generation anew, "was not written for little women or little men or little anybodies; it was the expression of a passionate memory." The imperishable children's books are not the product of child psychology, but of the recapturing of one's own childhood. It was so with Mark Twain, with Stevenson, with Kipling—with all those whose tales delight both old and young.

The books we read in our adolescent years, I suspect, have a stronger influence on our attitude toward life, and a larger share

in forming our tastes and preferences, than those whose acquaintance we make earlier or later. The child's reading may contribute to the eventual quality of his mind—its possession or lack, for instance, of imagination—and the adult's reading may influence his opinions and widen his horizons, but what one has read between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, let us say, is likely to have given direction to one's life. To whatever degree a man's character may be determined by the time he is six, we know in the light of modern psychology it is not then unalterably set. The pattern thus established is certain to affect, if not determine, the lines of his reaction to any set of circumstances which he may later encounter; but though his temperament has received its basic mould, within the walls that blood and background have built about him there is room for structures of his own building, from which it is possible for him to see over the walls which surround him, even if he be unable to surmount them. And much of that building is done, often unwittingly, during the adolescent years.

In my own case, the writers who meant most to me between the ages of fifteen and eighteen were Emerson, Carlyle, Tennyson, Whitman, and Shakespeare. So far as I can see, my interest in these writers bore no relation to the reading I had done as a child, beyond the fact that most of them were predominantly poets, and poetry had delighted me from the time when I first began to read. I am of the opinion that the reading done in adolescence, of one's own volition, stems only occasionally from the books of one's early childhood. What does carry over, of course, is the establishment of the reading habit. Incidentally, I think there is no more insubstantial bugaboo than that of the harm supposedly resident in children's reading. They are better insulated than adolescents, or many people of mature years, against what is false or meretricious. They extract what is theirs, and reject what is not, with a surer instinct. When my daughter, then aged nine, came upon a copy of David Graham Phillips's *Susan Lennox: Her Fall and Rise*, and read it with absorption, I was surprised, but not at all

disturbed. And I was more than a little amused when, in answer to my question as to why she had found it so interesting, she replied, "Why, Daddy, that's real life!"

It seems to me now that in stumbling upon the writers who formed the core of my adolescent reading, I was fortunate in that the predominant note which that reading struck for me was a positive one, that the writers who held my youthful imagination and who fired my adolescent thoughts were writers who, in their total effect, spoke a resounding Yes to life. They were none of them whiners, sneerers, none of them permanently embittered. It is so much easier to deal with the cynical, the disillusioned, and the bitter when you have begun, at least, to stand upon your own feet intellectually, that to take too stiff a dose of such reading before one's mental muscles have hardened seems to me unfortunate and even dangerous. There is, however, one definite exception I would make on the negative side. A good dash of healthy and intelligent scepticism, of writers not too ready to accept anything at its face value, is of the greatest benefit to the youthful mind. All our lives most of us, and perhaps most of all those in whom the habit of reading is ingrained, have to guard and fight against that strange mesmerism that is resident in print. Statements that have the peculiar sanction of type, and which, if orally made, we would brush away like a buzzing fly, often receive our respectful attention merely because they have achieved the spurious dignity of print. Sometimes I think the best we can get from an education, whether formal or self-obtained, is the inflexible habit of examining every new fact, and every conclusion drawn from fact, warily from top to toe. An education, however conducted, that neglects the sceptical approach is no education at all. And if the wisdom of the world is in books, so, too, is a vast amount of nonsense.

To return to the five writers I have named, and what, as it seems to me now, I got from them. No youngster, I think, can have Shakespeare come alive for him and not be filled with a sense of the drama and splendour, as well as the tedium and

misery, which life can compass. And he, of course, like all great writers, should be read in his entirety. To have read only the bitter comedies and the profound agony of *Lear*, not to have known the calm of spirit in which *The Tempest* was written, is not to have received all that Shakespeare has to give.

Emerson quickened in me the sense of expectancy, showed me what a boggy the fear of inconsistency can be, opened the door to self-reliance, steadied me with his "Why so hot, my little man?" Whitman reinforced Emerson in these respects (for he owed him more than any other formative influence), and furthermore contributed an expansiveness that was lacking in the other. It was Emerson who led me to Carlyle; both taught me to see sincerity as a cardinal value; but what I got most from Carlyle, I think, aside from the realization of what words could be made to do as vivid portraiture, was a deepened sense of the exhilaration that goes with struggle, and an understanding that it is a universal condition of life. What I drew from Tennyson was chiefly a sensuous pleasure: a delight in the music which words could make and the pictures they could evoke. Also, he dramatized for me the search for faith that began in his age and carried over into our own.

For these influences I believe I have reason to be deeply grateful, though there were drawbacks, too, in the absence of certain qualities which can toughen the unfolding mind. None of these writers, you may note, had a predominantly analytical sense, and that lack, for a youngster temperamentally disinclined to accept the mental discipline of mathematics, was unfortunate. They were writers in whom the intuitive approach to truth prevailed, and I had to learn that to come by it often entailed more sweat than was drawn from you if you took Emerson's counsel too literally to heart, and waited patiently for the oracle in the pine woods to speak. True, that oracle does sometimes speak, and wisely, but its pronouncements are a supplement to, and not a substitute for, intelligent inquiry.

It would be rash to speak dogmatically, but as I look back-

ward now, and try to assess the results of that reading, it seems to me evident that in my own case, at least, my present tastes and preferences where books are concerned derive in no small measure from the time when my reading was opening up, from day to day, new and exciting vistas. The writers with whom I then lived were, as I have already said, men who reached an accord with life, and I still prefer those who share that attitude. Writers who conceive of life as an evil joke at man's expense, who see men as helpless automata, writers who deny or sneer at the dignity of the human spirit, have little or nothing for me, and I think that to read them, except for the purposes of study, is a waste of time.

I like to read about a thoroughgoing rascal, and I think the world would be an insufferable place if it were occupied entirely by people determined on doing good to one another. Do you remember William James's hearty sigh of relief when, at the close of a Chautauqua season, he left behind him its aseptic world and gleefully watched from the train window as he came back once more to the world of imperfections, dirt, and sin? All the same, rascality, meanness, and depravity are to the literary diet as salt to food, as wit and verbal fireworks are akin to mustard. They are welcome and even necessary ingredients of a well-balanced fare, but there are some writers who seem to be of the opinion that such condiments afford by themselves a satisfactory basis of subsistence.

I think that such prejudices as I may have, broadly considered, in creative writing, and with particular reference to the novel, must be reasonably obvious from what I have already written. If these constitute a bias in favour of a constructive attitude towards human affairs, as displayed by writers, if they indicate a decided preference for clarity and broad human appeal as against a ministering to the tastes of the self-appointed literary elect, if they reveal something like impatience with those who find the wine of living permanently sour on their tongues, I am content to let the record stand. Nor do I write as one who has always found

the path smooth and the prospect inviting; there have been times for me, as for a great many of us, when I have felt that I neither wished nor was able to go further; like nearly all of us who have lived beyond youth, I have sometimes questioned whether the game were worth the candle. I have a deep conviction that it is; I believe it always is. I would make but one exception to that belief, and that is a life of hopeless slavery.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DOLDRUMS

I

IT is generally agreed that the publication in 1900 of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* stands as a landmark in the history of the American novel. It was, and remains, historically at least, an important book—one of the major factors in breaking the fetters of gentility which were, at the time when Dreiser wrote it, still encumbering our fiction. But when his most direct descendant in the contemporary novel, and one of the most able of the naturalists who have followed in his wake, Mr. James T. Farrell, says of him: "He raised American life, its contrasts, grandeur and misery, its streets and cities, its tragedies and vulgarities, to the level of world literature," he is, I think, doing scant justice to the men who preceded Dreiser in that effort. If Dreiser was the cumbersome battering-ram who finally breached the walls of the Philistines, they were the many-pointed spearhead of the attack. I am thinking of writers like Ed Howe, Harold Frederic, Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, and Stephen Crane, who prepared the ground for him, and still more of Mark Twain and William Dean Howells, who may certainly be said to have raised American life to the level of world literature long before the name of Theodore Dreiser was one to reckon with. If Howells thought it salutary to confine his novels to those aspects of our life which, as "the more smiling ones," seemed to him "the more American," we have only recently begun to see the value of his work in proper perspective. Even though he was more courageous in his criticism and his appreciation than in his own creative work, there is much more awareness now than there was even ten years ago that restricted though they were, the novels of William Dean Howells

brought something both solid and illuminating to the depiction of American life. His title to fame as a pioneering American realist (with self-imposed reservations), and an artist of delicate rather than powerful perceptions, will one day stand again unquestioned. And as for Mark Twain, when he has finally been disengaged from the critical coils in which the dissentient views of Messrs. Van Wyck Brooks and Bernard De Voto have enmeshed him, he will emerge more clearly as not merely the first American writer after Melville to merit the world's attention, but also as the first who in his fictions (whatever the impediments to his full development as a creative artist may have been) gave some clue to the contradictory elements in the American character which possess us still. In my own estimation, the contribution of Dreiser to the coming-of-age of American fiction, solid though it was, must give precedence to the work of Howells and Twain, with a slight genuflection to the right in the direction of Henry James, of whom the worst that can be said is that he wasted himself and his undeniable powers on insignificant material. Moreover, as I shall argue in the succeeding chapter, Dreiser's liberating influence upon the American novel was heavily counterbalanced by the deadening effect he exerted through the naturalism of his approach and the sloppy manner of his execution.

What I am concerned with in the present chapter is the state of American creative literature during the years immediately preceding and following the turn of the century. We were, so far as the general temper of writing in that period is considered, and the answering taste of the reading public, decidedly in the doldrums. There were, to be sure, restive stirrings on the part of the men I have named as preparing the ground for Dreiser's onslaught, but the picture as a whole was not one to excite anticipation. This was true all along the line: in fiction, in poetry, in criticism.

The vital impulses in American writing seemed to have spent themselves. That flowering of New England which Mr. Van Wyck Brooks has so well described had already faded into history,

and the Indian summer which he has similarly made live for us again was drawing swiftly to a close. The South, which was to wait until the Nineteen-twenties for its literary awakening, was gripped in a wistful nostalgia for the days of its vanished glory, of which George Washington Cable had made the tenderest evocation, and its closest approach to the bone and sinew of American life had been in the folk quality of the Uncle Remus tales by Joel Chandler Harris. That other, new America, the land of the Mississippi and beyond, which had been given literary habitation and life in the pages of Mark Twain, was to be scantily acknowledged in the closing decade of the last century and the opening one of this; Owen Wister's *The Virginian* was typical of the treatment which it received, and Mark Twain himself had, greatly to our loss, turned to other themes. It is only within the last few years that the rich variety and vitality of our Western material has been rediscovered, and the best writing from that source is yet, I believe, to come.

The dominant type of fiction at the turn of the century was the romantic historical novel, and the best-seller lists of the period were more frequently topped by such heavily embroidered tales as *When Knighthood Was in Flower* than by any others. Although the setting was frequently that of a distant age and country, there were also numerous excursions into the American past, beginning in 1890 with Harold Frederic's *In the Valley*, a story of the French and Indian War, and reaching the height of popular favour with such tales as Dr. Weir Mitchell's *Hugh Wynne*, Mary Johnston's *To Have and To Hold*, and Gertrude Atherton's *The Conqueror*.

These romances differed greatly, as we shall later see, from those re-creations of the American past which have been spawned in such abundance during the last fifteen years. Many of these have been unabashedly romantic in mood, but there have been not a few which made a realistic approach to their material, and which turned a critical and freshly appraising eye upon the men and events of whatever period with which they were concerned.

And while the earlier books had been merely the product of a shift in public taste, those of our own time owed their origin, in part at least, to the national mood of self-examination and the quest for new or revived values. Some clue, their authors and readers seemed to feel, to the problems by which we were ourselves beset might possibly be found by an inquiring and reflective approach to the situations in which we had as a people lived out our lives in other times.

There was, too, a somewhat similar difference between the work of the local colourists who flourished almost equally with the historical romancers and the regional writers who have recently been coming to the fore. A wide gulf separates the stories, let us say, of Thomas Nelson Page, F. Hopkinson Smith, and James Lane Allen, who staked out their claims in the South, from those of Ellen Glasgow, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, William Faulkner, and Erskine Caldwell, who did the same. If we particularize the region inhabited by the Southern mountaineers, pounced upon by such writers as Charles Egbert Craddock and John Fox as the perfect source for the discovery and exploitation of quaint differences, how trivial and shallow is their approach set by the side of that employed by Miss Roberts, or of Jesse Stuart and James Still. Whatever the locale, the unlikeness of the two groups—that of the century's turn and that of to-day—is equally apparent. When we come to New England, however, we observe in the stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, and to a lesser degree in those of Alice Brown and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, a greater measure of veracity and integrity, separating their work less sharply from that of John P. Marquand, who, except for Santayana's one fictional excursion into the morass of his temporarily adopted New England, and Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, has had that corner of the country pretty much to himself. I do not include Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* because, although its setting is presumably New Hampshire, there is no apparent effort on his part so to define it, and the lives which the play chronicles might well have been lived in

almost any region of the United States. I shall not go into the nature of these differences here, for I mean to discuss them in a later chapter dealing with the revival which we have witnessed of a true regionalism, as opposed to a mere school of local colour.

2

It is only fair to remember that among the writers at the turn of the century who were content to swim with the current—the men and women who put forth these pleasant historical confections, and these brightly coloured but essentially trivial pictures of this or that American region, there were some who, for all the limitations imposed by the manner of their approach, were gifted and conscientious artists. It is possible even now to admire much in their craftsmanship, in their grasp of that fundamental skill in fiction, the ability to tell a story (the lack of which was so soon to be forgiven writers whose central aim was otherwise), in their frequently deft objective handling of character and their command of English, in which they outstripped many a writer who took part in the subsequent liberation of fiction from the inhibitions and taboos under which they worked.

There was James Lane Allen, for example, best known for *The Choir Invisible*, whose sensitivity as an artist has become obscured for us by his prevailing sentimentalism; or Mary Johnston, whose work had a structural power and a vividness in her battle scenes for which we do not customarily look in a woman; there was Francis Marion Crawford, whose cosmopolitan tales delighted two generations of readers, and who was a master in the art of keeping his story moving; there was Miss Jewett, with her stories of the plain folk of Maine, in whom Willa Cather has recognized an artist of first-rate powers within her limited scope; there was Dr. Weir Mitchell, no mere confectioner, with his carefully worked historical novels and his fictional projections of his vocation as a psychiatrist. These few should suffice to keep the picture in perspective; if the period was one to

irk restless, searching minds, it was, nevertheless, not one to be despised.

And I should like to interject here a word or two about the novel as art and the novel as a skilfully executed report on life. There is, I think, a very real distinction to be made. As Dr. James Southall Wilson recently pointed out in a review of Miss Glasgow's collected prefaces for her novels, which were written, as she explicitly sets forth in *A Certain Measure*, out of the conception of the novel as an art form, one cannot say of Fielding (whom, ironically enough, Miss Glasgow greatly admires and enjoys) that he worked from a like conception. He was not concerned with form; he did not work, in Dr. Wilson's words, "as a painter fitting his design to his canvas." Yet, though the judgment could hardly be unanimous, not a few critics would agree with Dr. Wilson that Fielding was the greatest of English novelists. I cannot myself, much as I like him, subscribe to that opinion, but there is no gainsaying the fact that there is in the novels of Fielding an unsurpassed vitality, a shrewd appraisal of and sympathy for humankind.

I make this digression because, as I remarked a moment ago, what we can still appreciate in the leading American novelists of the Eighteen-nineties and the early Nineteen-hundreds is the measure in which they were conscious artists. We are little interested now in what they had to say, if, indeed, they had anything, but we can respect the degree to which they were craftsmen. In Henry James, of course, we see conscious occupation with the novel as a form of art become preoccupation, so that in the intensity of his concern with shape and pattern and manner, he became blinded to the underlying triviality or irrelevance of much of the material with which he dealt. The novel, we might almost say, has suffered from an internal conflict between manner and matter almost since its beginnings. Certainly it is the least pure of all art forms, and the most chameleon-like in its constantly shifting manifestations.

Perhaps I should have included among the personal bases which

I set forth in the preceding chapter, or even have named it as a bias, my preference for form in the novel. I like and find immensely satisfying an architectural sense in writing of any description; when it finds play in creative writing I believe it to be suspect only when the writer permits his feeling for form to twist or distort the truth that he is trying to convey. Whenever the two aims of content and form are fully integrated, whether in such brief compass as Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* or Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*, or over a larger canvas, as in the Joseph series of Thomas Mann or Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, there is a satisfaction of the aesthetic sense that is often lacking in work of profounder value. Thus *War and Peace* cannot properly be said to have design, but its meanings for us, its contribution to the richness of our lives, are immeasurably greater than that of any of the other books I have just named. The question I have raised, therefore, is one where dogmatism is more than ever obstructive to a clear and just appreciation. Yet can one deny that *War and Peace*, great though it is, would be greater still if, beyond its deep and wide and utterly veracious reading of human life, it were to have the architectural quality of a great cathedral or the mounting structure of a Beethoven symphony? All we may say, surely, is that if one of the two elements must be sacrificed or denied, let it be that of form, for are we not faced with the old choice between shadow and substance?

3

I turn now to the state of poetry during the two decades to which this chapter is devoted. It is, for the most part, a sorry picture that confronts us. Poetry was at a low ebb indeed, though the years were approaching when the elder Yeats would remark that "the fiddles were tuning up all over America." Whitman was not to die until 1892, but as a poet he had long been silent, and during the Eighteen-nineties the voice that was more widely heard in the land was that of the homely, folksy singer, James

Whitcomb Riley. With humour and tenderness, if without depth or elevation or artistic distinction, he recalled for his grateful countrymen the sights and sounds, the pleasures and the joys of their rural youth. Emily Dickinson's poems were not published until 1890, but she was already in her grave, and her reputation was not to reach full growth for many years.

Who was there, then, besides the Hoosier celebrator of childhood who, incidentally, preferred to meditate upon its charms from a safe distance? There was Richard Hovey, banging his stein on the table and chanting in company with Bliss Carman his vagabond's song of the open road. To be sure, he did attempt an unsentimentalized approach to the Arthurian legends, to be actually achieved much later by another poet who in 1897 published his first book, but was to wait many years for popular recognition, Edwin Arlington Robinson. He does not properly belong to the period, but rather to the poetic renaissance which was to get under way in 1912 with the founding of Harriet Monroe's magazine, *Poetry*.

There was also William Vaughan Moody, a poet of really fine and deep potentialities, who died before he had arrived at his full stature. Though it is questionable whether he would ever have completely thrown off the academicism with which his wings were weighted, there can be little doubt that had he lived beyond his short span of forty-one years, American poetry would be richer than it is. Even so, the passionate and powerful "Ode in Time of Hesitation," written in protest against American imperialism, and a few of his earlier lyrics belong, even to-day, in the major body of American poetry. Like Hovey, whom he far surpassed, and Robinson, who was in turn his own better, he stood among the forward-looking writers of his time.

Aside from two women poets, Lizette Woodworth Reese and Louise Imogen Guiney, in whose work there were both delicacy and strength, there remains to be mentioned only one other poet with whom we need for a moment to be concerned. This was George Santayana, whose poetry, as contained in his beautifully

executed *Sonnets*, was to be no more than a passing phase in his long and distinguished career. Santayana's was a strange voice to be lifted in that time, with its depth, its intellectual and spiritual questing—but then he was a stray, a temporary, unrooted guest among us, standing completely apart from the currents which swirled about him, but which never touched his inner and utterly self-contained self.

The two decades, then, if we assign Robinson to his proper place in the later period when his poetry was a really active force in American writing, could not boast between them a single poet of major stature. There was any amount of competent but rigidly traditional verse, the writers of which we do not need to resurrect from the dead. Poetry was something to be clipped from the newspapers and magazines by those whose sense of humour was tickled or whose sentiments were stirred; or it was enshrined in plush or imitation leather "gift books," to be conspicuously displayed on the parlour table. It had seldom any direct connection with the lives which Americans were living or hoped to live, and, with few notable exceptions, it had nothing beyond safe sentiment, prettiness, and a reminiscent music as offer of enrichment to those lives. There were no arguments about poetry; it was a tepid and, by the greater number of reading people, rather grudgingly acknowledged accompaniment to "culture."

4

A word remains to be said about two other phases of our literature during the period under discussion. If its achievements in the novel and in poetry were for the most part negligible, and if criticism in the dynamic sense (the only sense in which criticism matters) was practically nonexistent, there was, however, a body of writing which, as Mr. Ludwig Lewisohn has pointed out in his *Expression in America*, was produced by "a group of personalities far more salient and powerful than those of any novelists or poets of the period," and which has thus far received inadequate atten-

tion from critics and historians of the period. The literature to which Mr. Lewisohn referred was the non-fictional prose written by William James, George Santayana, Henry Adams, Lafcadio Hearn, James Huneker, and the naturalist of the Western woods and mountains, John Muir. Although Mr. Lewisohn does not include him, perhaps because his books were published a little later, at the close of his long life, he belongs in the period of which I now write, rather than in the years of ferment which immediately followed. I can accept the exclusion from such a list of New York State's John Burroughs, for though I read him with not a little interest in my teens, I can see now that he was too derivative in thought, too commonplace in observation, and too much outside the Nature of which he wrote so smoothly and copiously, to rank beside Thoreau or even Muir.

In common with most people, I suppose, I have always much preferred the prose of William James, sinewy, lively, terse, and crystal-clear, to that of his brother Henry, who had the same passion for lucidity, but who strove to attain it by a process of expansion and parenthetical explanation, so that he sometimes seemed to be approaching an idea from all sides at once. William James's *Psychology* is the best-written and most delightful textbook I have ever read; if anyone has yet surpassed him in lucid exposition, aptness of illustration, and the ability to make the acquisition of knowledge a painless pleasure, I do not know his name. But William James had other gifts than these; he had a restless, widely ranging mind, alive in every fibre to the multiple conflicting impacts of the life about him, so that one sometimes wishes it had been he rather than Henry who undertook the writing of fiction; with his much wider human sympathies, his humour, his penetration of pretence and sham and his darting eye, we might have had in him a novelist of commanding stature. Even so, if he framed no lasting system of philosophy, he cast a bright illumination on every subject that he touched (nor should we now forget his "moral equivalent for war"); he was a fermenting force in his country's life and thought. None knew better

than he the maggot at the heart of American idealism, the moral flabbiness nourished by the worship of the bitch-goddess Success; the enigma underneath, which made Santayana once declare that we should never truly know whether Americans were at bottom idealists or materialists until they had endured the trials of Job.

And Santayana himself: are we to forget that he began teaching at Harvard in the 'Nineties and that his monumental *Life of Reason* was published as a whole in 1905? His presence on the platform is one of the indelible pictures that more than one youth carried away from his four years at Cambridge; I can see him still, the fine dark eyes lit with a sombre glow as his mind warmed to the elaboration of his thought, the slight but never stumbling hesitation as he hovered above and then descended on the single word, the phrase, that gave precision to his meaning. I am not sufficiently at home in either the theory of aesthetics or in formal philosophy to touch upon his merits as a thinker, but I can appreciate what Van Wyck Brooks has called his "wonder and pleasure in the face of Nature," and the supreme grace and ordered beauty of his style.

Though *The Education of Henry Adams* and *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* did not become accessible to the general reading public until some years after their initial private distribution in 1906 and 1904 respectively, their author must be mentioned here. Nobody watched the currents of the time more closely, with greater detachment, or with more apprehension than did Henry Adams from his Washington eyrie. Within the period with which I am at present concerned, he wrote two books which have, as surely as any others, a permanent place in American literature and in the literature of the modern world. And some twenty years earlier he had completed one of the most detailed and masterly studies in American history, his account of the administrations of Jefferson and Madison. Henry Adams called himself a failure, but one can accept his self-deprecation only in the light of his unrealized potentialities and his thwarted ambitions. In *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* he penetrated and

revealed the mind and soul of a distant age; in the *Education* he not only wrote one of the most fascinating self-analyses in all literature, one of the fullest recordings of what a thinking and deeply cultured human being had drawn from his experience of life; he mirrored with extraordinary power and insight the tendencies and difficulties of his own time. It is true that, in the case of the latter, his conclusions were negative to the point of hopelessness; one may believe otherwise, and yet be in his debt for his illuminating recognition of the hazards that we face. And these things he did in a style that was at once admirably incisive and suggestive.

Lafcadio Hearn was one of the strangest offshoots of our literature; the exotic has never had much part in the American temper, and it took this son of an Irish father and a Greek mother to produce the most striking blooms of that nature that we have to show. Mr. Lewisohn acutely remarks that, violent though the contrast is between Adams and Hearn in background, personality and performance, "the two men rebelled against a similar chaos, a meaningless multiplicity in Western civilization"; and that Hearn was the happier of the two because through his immersion in Japanese life and culture he found, or believed he had found, the unity which Adams discovered in the thirteenth century, but failed to find in his own. And whether one is attracted or repelled by the subtle scents and flavours of Hearn's writing, one must acknowledge that he was the master of a beautifully evocative and flowing, if over-delicate, style.

James Huneker, who spoke of himself as "a Jack of the Seven Arts, master of none," was the most vital and catholic of impressionist critics, even though the qualifying adjective makes a contradiction in terms. The range of his appreciation was enormous, and its quality infectious. He did more, probably, than any other writer of his period to make Americans aware of European activity in the arts. He wrote with prodigious gusto, and with a boyishly swaggering cosmopolitanism that brought his readers close and held them. He was, as Van Wyck Brooks has observed, a wholesome corrective for the prevailing attitude towards things

European, which "our grim commercialism, fortified by Mark Twain's humour, had led us to ridicule and decry."

Neither he nor John Muir—another coupling of vastly dissimilar men—wrote in a style of distinction comparable to the other men of the group I have just been describing. I have not read a page of Muir in many years, and then not much; he is one of those writers a return to whom I have long been promising myself. Though his prose had not the texture of Thoreau's, its sturdy quality, as I now remember it, seems to me well conveyed in what Mark Van Doren has written of him:

Muir made important observations, but he was less a cool scientist than a seer hot upon the trail of the secrets of the earth. To accompany him is to put off the burdens of civilization and to go back to primitive conditions in which man lives in nature without feeling obliged to dominate or exploit it. These conditions Muir describes in rich and picturesque detail. He seems to have studied every flower or tree or mountain-peak or waterfall or bird or beast till he was familiar with it as with his own hand; yet his account never suffers from monotony, so brightly does it move and so vividly does it communicate its enthusiasm. . . . He is dramatic because he deals little with still life, and much with movement.

And, as Mr. Van Doren observes, his frequent raptures escape the charge of sentimentalism because of the fire and passion with which they are reported.

5

Writers like these are surely sufficient to redeem a period otherwise open to the charge of barrenness. If they cannot strictly be called creative writers—in the sense in which we apply the term to fiction, to drama, and to poetry—certainly what they wrote was literature, and literature of a high order. As we look back upon the period in which they worked, we see that they were, to a greater degree than most of the novelists and poets

who were their contemporaries, sensitive to and reflective about the forces which were operating in their country and their time. This was not true, of course, of Muir—not because he was Scottish born, but because the world of Nature meant infinitely more to him than the world of man.

It was, for the majority of Americans, a period of deep complacency. The great fortunes whose foundations had been laid during the years of rapid expansion and exploitation following the Civil War had borne fruit in the widespread manifestations of great wealth. Our society was in a state of constant and omnipresent flux. Even those elements of the rapidly mounting population which did not share generously in the distribution of wealth on the upper levels looked with awe and fascination rather than bitterness and despair upon the blatant exhibitions of what money could buy and do which everywhere met their eyes. They looked on with expectation as well as with envy which was not unmingled with a vicarious delight; what they were spectators of to-day they might be participants in to-morrow. There was grumbling, to be sure, over the growth of the big trusts, but, then, was there not also their champion Teddy, laying vigorously about him with his Big Stick? There was periodic grumbling also on the part of the farmers, but that had long been an accompaniment of American life. There were the Anarchist riots in Chicago, but there was also the promise of the full dinner pail.

We were a nation expanding its chest; had we not licked the Spanish fleet, and hunted the troublesome Aguinaldo to his lair? Had we not twice in the past twisted the British lion's tail? Were we not a people grown to such a stature that the older world must recognize in us a new-fledged power? Were we not potentially the richest, and by all odds the most democratic nation on the face of the earth? We walked the ancient streets of Europe and made invidious comparisons—a habit that clung to us long after the century made its turn.

The future lay before us, bright, unending, and streets no less celestial than those of the hymn-books would some day be paved

with gold. As for the occasional lonely voices, lifted in protest, quiet or shrill, they were crabbers, malcontents, crazy Socialists, dreamers; and we were, as Theodore Roosevelt wrote to E. H. Harriman, a nation of practical men. Such was the national mood in which we began our journey into the twentieth century; can we wonder that the character of our literature during the 'Nineties and the early Nineteen-hundreds was what we have just observed it to have been? But the complacency was soon to be pricked from every side; a restless and critical spirit was shortly to take possession of our books, and we were to turn savagely and tear at our own entrails.

CHAPTER THREE

WINDS FOR THE SAIL

I

WHAT happened to American literature after the first decade of the present century—for during its opening years we were still inhabitants, in spirit, of the nineteenth century—was partly the product of our own growing pains and partly the result of forces which were making themselves felt throughout the world.

We had lagged behind English literature in reflecting adequately the scepticism with which the Victorian values were being regarded by such English novelists (themselves products of the late Victorian age) as Hardy, Meredith, and Samuel Butler, all of whom, by reason of the attitudes which they adopted, belonged properly to the twentieth century. For these men were at war with much that had been woven into the fabric of nineteenth-century thought; each, in his own way, attacked Victorian ideas. Hardy denied the central tenet of the Victorian creed—that man was upheld in his triumphant march towards an indefinitely continuing progress by the benevolent purpose of a Supreme Power; Meredith, who did find in Nature, if not in God as the Victorians had conceived him, a certain beneficence, did a great deal, as G. K. Chesterton has reminded us, to undermine John Bull's Victorian complacency, and, also, he gave a tremendous impetus to woman's freer participation in the life of our time; Butler, from whom, as everybody now knows, Bernard Shaw derived his thunder, fought the entrenched positions of those who had made themselves the authoritarian spokesmen for science and religion. As we have seen, there had been in our own creative literature nothing comparable to the body of work produced by these men, Howells, in his Utopian romances, had questioned the economic

premisses of his time, and Mark Twain had directed his satire against the sins of the Gilded Age; there had been, in the work of Hamlin Garland and others, a sporadically bitter portrayal of American farm life; but Howells quickly regained his serenity. Twain turned to the recollection of his boyhood and to take comfort in the inspiring story of the Maid, before he plunged into the dark pit of *The Mysterious Stranger*; Garland made an about-face and took to writing about the Far West in a purely romantic vein. Their thrusts had been scattered and ineffectual, and it was inevitable that when the reaction came, it would be exaggerated and intense.

Similarly, we had lagged behind the Europeans and the English in adoption of the naturalistic approach which the French had fathered as far back as the 'Sixties, when Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* opened the way for the full-fledged scientific approach to the art of fiction which Zola was soon to make. Germany, Spain, and Italy withstood the impact of Zola's massive effort to encompass all of man's degradation in completely objective terms until the 'Eighties; the Scandinavians, on the other hand, reacted very quickly to the French influence; such writers as Strindberg in Sweden, George Brandes and J. P. Jacobsen in Denmark, were in the vanguard. Jacobsen I have never read, but Professor Agnes Hansen, in her *Twentieth Century Forces in European Fiction*, points out that his novels interpret life in terms of biologic determinism, with a definitely atheistic bias. England went untouched until the 'Nineties, and even then was, by comparison with the Continent, only lightly affected.

Russia, meantime, had pursued a course peculiarly her own. She had never been wholly in the current of Western European life, any more than she is to-day, and the line of her literary history is closely entwined with that of her own more or less isolated and independent social and political development. The great flowering of her creative literature closely approximated in time that of the English Victorians, and it was, in fiction at least, the greatest literature of its age. Her three great masters in the

novel, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, were each variously but profoundly reflecting the ferment which had seethed through Russian life ever since the emancipation of the serfs in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Russian literature reflects like a fever chart the alternating periods of progress and reaction which have marked Russia's history for a century past. Following the repressive years that were the result of Alexander II's assassination in 1881, there came a wave of concern with form rather than content in Russian literature, corresponding somewhat to the Beardsley-Wilde era in England's 'Nineties. Then Chekhov, the father of the modern short story, swung Russian fiction back into realistic paths. Again, after the abortive revolution of 1905, one may observe in Russian literature a smothering wave of disillusionment closely corresponding to that which enveloped Western Europe and ourselves in the years immediately following World War I and its abortive peace. Nihilism leaped into the saddle, and writers like Artzybashev indulged themselves in the most unrelieved cynicism, or, like Sologub, divorced themselves from human life in all its better aspects, and made a cult of demonism or brutality. Russia's great realists had embraced both god and devil in man, but besides the men, like Gorky and Bunin, who continued their tradition in the years immediately preceding World War I, there was this large group which found the devil of bestiality in everything which man did.

I have spoken of Russia at some length because this division during the period of her disillusionment parallels very closely a similar situation in the United States, in England, and in Western Europe following the Peace of Versailles. We shall find that our own writers were divided into groups: those who were swept from their moorings by the tidal wave of despair, and wrote either in bitterly cynical mood or occupied themselves with experiments in form; and the smaller number who clung to permanent values—of whom Robert Frost is the outstanding example—and while refusing to see man as one with the angels, declined also to see in him only the beast from whom he stemmed.

2

Naturalism, as Zola had conceived and practised it, trickled into American writing as the nineteenth century was coming to an end. Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* and *Prairie Folk*, coming in 1891 and 1893, were written without benefit of Zola; they derived directly from Garland's own experience, from his memory of the drab and bitter fight for existence which life on the expanding frontier had frequently been. Naturalism as a conscious literary movement in America properly begins with the early work of Stephen Crane. This extraordinarily gifted young man, who was only twenty-one when, in 1893, he published *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, was to die at twenty-nine, ending the most promising literary career ever to be cut short in our history. *Maggie* was published at his own expense, for he could find no publisher willing to undertake it; and except for extended hands of welcome from Garland and Howells, the book sank without a sound. It was not a very good book, and it lacked the distinction of phrase, the flash of poetry, that characterized Crane's later writing. But it was important because it was uncompromisingly honest and because Crane was unafraid of material which no contemporary of his had had the courage to use. The slums of the lower East Side were very much a part of New York life, but no one before Crane had dared to put them into fiction. He took his readers, or rather, invited them, for they did not come, into a tenement of the most miserable description, and turned his steady gaze on the degraded life he saw: drunken, brutalized parents; a young girl seeking escape from her depraved and vicious mother and falling prey to a man who tossed her aside. The story ends with her suicide by drowning; Crane did not sentimentalize, nor did he moralize; he told his tale with simple, stark severity.

Only a year later he wrote a much finer book, one that is still among the more notable achievements in American fiction: *The Red Badge of Courage*. It dealt with the experience of a young, untried soldier in the Civil War, and it violated a first principle

of creative writing in that, although it made of Harry Brown a realistic and even naturalistic approach to its subject, it used material of which its author had no first-hand experience. The measure of Crane's genius lies in the fact that he nevertheless succeeded in writing a story of astounding veracity. This amazing feat of sympathetic imagination was aided, we know, by what he had heard at first-hand from veterans of the conflict; we know also that he had read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and, probably, *La Chartreuse de Parme* of Stendhal, both novelists who had written as realistically of war as any who have followed them. In *The Red Badge* Crane looked at battle with the same directness of vision he had turned upon the Bowery slum, and he gave a completely convincing account of what passed through the mind of the young recruit on whom the story is centred; no soldier who has ever read it has, so far as I know, ever questioned its penetrating truth.

But Crane had qualities which went beyond the massed weight of the naturalistic method; unlike Dreiser, who was directly to influence the American novel more than Crane, he had the capacity for those illuminating flashes which, by the turn of a phrase, light up a whole situation. Who can forget the moment when Henry Fleming, waiting with his unit to move up into the line for his first experience of battle, suddenly realizes his predicament? Crane wrote, "He saw instantly that it would be impossible for him to escape from the regiment. It enclosed him. And there were iron laws of tradition and law on four sides. He was in a moving box."

"He was in a moving box." It is that phrase which does it. It flashes through one's mind, sends up a flare like a rocket. That phrase may stand, too, as a symbol for the conception which Crane then shared with Frank Norris in his early work, and with Dreiser in *all* his work, of man as the helpless, driven animal, shut in by forces against which he is too puny to struggle. It is the conception of man as journeying through life in a moving box, hemmed in by his environment, his instincts, his heredity. Crane, I feel certain, would have broken through the walls had he lived,

for there was growth in him, and the signs of a wider view are evident in his later work.

3

Frank Norris, with whom his name is so often linked, died almost as young, at thirty-two. To a greater degree than Crane, because he was more directly influenced by Zola and had less of the poet in him, Norris tried to apply the Frenchman's methods to American material. If he did not have Crane's gift for the illuminating phrase or for the intensely revealing situation, he wrote with great energy and passion, he had a stronger dramatic sense and a capacity for the sustained development of a story which made him more fully equipped as a novelist than Crane, whose genius was better adapted to the short story. It was in *McTeague*, begun while Norris was in college but not published until several years later, in 1899, that he adhered most faithfully to the naturalistic approach. In the whole range of American fiction, there is no more depressing tale than this. It is the story of the disintegration of character in a man and a woman, largely as the result of economic pressure. Its power rests in the feeling of inevitability with which Norris was able to invest his novel. But even here there is evident a strange contradiction present in the work of these early exponents of American naturalism—less so in Crane, more so in Norris—and that is the degree to which their interest in elemental passions, their admiration for brute strength, led them into a form of romanticism. Norris made his *McTeague* a blond beast of a man, in whom the primitive brute lurks close to the surface; he is the forerunner of those characters in "red-blooded" fiction which were to run riot a little later in the work of Jack London and to leave their trace in work so recent as that of Ernest Hemingway. Crane, in some of his short stories, foreshadowed the type; Norris realized it more completely. In his *Vandover and the Brute*, for that matter, you have a story that is pure Jack London in its theme, which is the conflict between a

man's higher and lower instincts, ending in the triumph of the latter, so that we leave Vandover at the last crawling about on all fours. It is a conclusion perilously close to the comic. Nor did the "man and his mate" theme, by which London, and later Hemingway, were so obsessed, originate with the author of *The Sea Wolf*. You will find it in Norris's *Moran of the Lady Letty*, in which a gently nurtured young aristocrat finds the primitive male of the Stone Age coming alive in him, to the end that he proves himself a fit mate for that heavily muscled young Valkyrie, Moran, who can toss off half a tumbler of whisky without a quiver. As a matter of fact, in all of Norris, the love interest is always on this elemental plane.

It was in Norris's epic of the wheat, his unfinished trilogy, of which he published *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903), that he undertook to apply the naturalistic method on a great scale to the study of man in the grip of natural and social forces. *The Octopus* pictures the production of the wheat in California, and the losing battle of the growers against the corrupt railway corporation that holds them in its grasp; *The Pit* transfers the scene to Chicago and centres on the marketing of the grain. Norris deals here with the savage struggle between the bulls and the bears, and shows his men engaged in a bitter competition in which quarter is neither asked nor given. The projected third volume was to have been called *The Wolf*. It was to have dealt with the distribution of the wheat, and probably would have had its setting in Europe. Norris died before the book was begun. It was in the course of this work, at the close of the first volume, as a matter of fact, that Norris wavered in the amoral attitude which he took over from Zola, and permitted his book to end on a note of idealism. Even though he had tried to show men mastered by the economic forces which they had themselves set in motion, he proclaimed: "The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, inevitably, resistlessly, work together for good."

Through the breach in the walls which these men had made,

others entered: Dreiser, whose ponderous persistence was to eclipse temporarily from our minds the winged arrow that was Crane, driving far and sure into the future; London, who could have been a much finer writer than he was; David Graham Phillips, who, in *Susan Lennox: Her Fall and Rise*, was free to make a full-length study of a kind at which eyebrows would have been raised a little earlier; and Robert Herrick, who was able to embark on a series of novels in which he pictured the American woman more critically and realistically than she had commonly been approached before. A word should be said, too, for William Sydney Porter (O. Henry), who if he got his effects by a rather shallow trickery which long impeded the growth of the American short story, nevertheless was one of those, like Crane and Norris, who widened the horizons of our fiction. By his choice of material he made us conscious of the life that was being lived in the shabby hall-bed-rooms of New York; he wrote about the most ordinary lives in the big city, and at a time when that newly coined phrase, "the Four Hundred," was on everybody's lips, he called his best collection of stories *The Four Million*.

I turn now, in the chapter that follows, to Dreiser and the literature on which his heavy hand was laid. In that, and subsequent chapters, we shall observe the penetration of American creative literature by the forces from within which prompted us to a more widespread self-examination than that afforded by the writers of whom I have been speaking; and the forces from without which were making themselves felt throughout the Western world: the new psychology, the gathering strength of collectivist ideas, the continued decline of religious faith, the hatred of war, the distrust of nationalism, the rise of the "new" physics, the ever-widening role of women, the cult of horror and brutality, the extremes of aesthetic experiment. From these, and the conflict between some of them, and again, from the re-emergence of beliefs and values which we had temporarily discarded, we shall begin to see taking form that future shape which I believe will be the prevailing pattern of the literature we are now beginning to write.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HEAVY HAND OF DREISER

I

IT is an ungrateful task that I have set myself in the present chapter, in so far as it will deal with Theodore Dreiser himself. As I have already remarked, his role in the development of American fiction was historically an important one, and it would be folly to minimize it. Better writers followed him who are in his debt for the courage and determination with which he fought his long battle against those who would have denied literature the freedom to range at will over the various levels of human life. So, too, it is only just to grant that, whatever may be lacking in Dreiser's novels, life itself is in them, however crudely and short-sightedly it is observed. They do not offer us the "smiling aspects" which Howells preferred as the "more truly American"; they are simply another part of the picture of which neither man painted the whole.

But if Dreiser contributed much to the widening of our literary boundaries, if he brought depth as well as scope to his writing, he also failed completely to bring it to elevation. His touch was heavy and earth-bound, and too many younger writers fell into step with his plodding gait. They did not copy his style, for, as even the least skilled could see, there was nothing there to emulate, but the effect of his work was, for a time, to make matter seem everything and manner nothing. Dreiser's example, imposed as it was on influences to which he himself had been subject, stimulated the production of hundreds of pedestrian novels pounded out on typewriters by young newspapermen and others who were in rebellion, as was he in everything he wrote, against his early environment.

Crane and Norris, both men of greater artistic capacity, of a finer sensitiveness and a more acute intelligence, died young, before they had fully matured as artists and as men, but Dreiser lumbered on, creeping forward as inexorably as a glacier. Unfortunately, he had no more selectivity than a glacier, and pebbles and boulders alike were carried forward in that unrelenting march. I cannot go along with Mr. Farrell when he says that Dreiser "can afford the luxury of clumsiness." No writer, it seems to me, headed for the favour of posterity, can afford that luxury.

Nor was it simply by his execrable craftsmanship, his stumbling, muddled, heavy-footed prose, that Dreiser failed as an artist. He could not think, and his lack of clarity and logic was not compensated for, as it sometimes is, by the power of intuition. Of the three great clarities—clarity of purpose, clarity of thought, and clarity of expression—Dreiser had only the first. His thinking is as heavy and confused as his prose.

All Dreiser's faults and limitations as an artist, as well as his shortcomings as a reflective observer of life—for his perception and handling of human relations were frequently weak—are plainly to be seen in the book which is commonly regarded as his masterpiece. *An American Tragedy*, which appeared in 1925, was the last book of consequence he published. The style had gained nothing over that of *Sister Carrie*, published a quarter of a century before; the one is as inept and fumbling, as weighted with banality, as the other. There is still no selective sense, no mastery of emphasis; like a powerful steam shovel, Dreiser's book scoops up in its capacious jaws everything that has the remotest bearing on the tale he has set himself to tell, and spews it forth again, still jumbled and indiscriminate.

What, then, of its content? For, as I have already remarked, no novelist can be devalued merely because he is lacking in form, and because he fails, as Fielding did, to approach his book as a sculptor does his clay, or a painter his canvas. Dreiser found the material from which he evolved his theme in the newspaper accounts of a

trial for murder. That, certainly, is not to his discredit; a writer takes his material where he finds it, and shapes it to his purpose. Dostoevsky, surely one of the world's major novelists, more than once used a similar source. Dreiser's essential failure lies in his incapacity to transmute the material he had absorbed. He shovels it into the furnace of his creative energy, burning with the slow, steady heat of that human sympathy and compassion which, with his sincerity, are his finest qualities, and the product issues forth, not as shining and tempered steel, but as a dull and amorphous metal.

Dreiser took the bare bones of the sordid story set forth in the trial of Chester Gillette for the murder of Grace Brown in 1906 and, as his title indicates, tried so to expand and interpret the facts as to make a drama which could be regarded as typical of life in the United States, and which would have the dignity and inevitability associated with the proper use of the word "tragedy." I realize that I am one of a perhaps small minority in maintaining that he failed to do this, and I shall try to be particularly clear in establishing why I think as I do, because it seems to me that Dreiser's failure in this book bears a close relation to the weaknesses in American literature during the period in which the book was written and published.

In *An American Tragedy* Chester Gillette becomes Clyde Griffiths, and Grace Brown becomes Roberta Alden. In describing the childhood of his protagonist, Dreiser, as any reader of his autobiographical work is aware, draws heavily upon the experiences and yearnings of his own early years. He, like Clyde, grew up in poverty, amid drab surroundings; he, too, was negatively conditioned by a fanatically religious parent—in Dreiser's case, his father; in Clyde's, his mother. And here, at the outset, there is, I think, a fundamental flaw in Dreiser's psychology; a boy will resist and react against the excessive piety of his father much more readily than against that of his mother, just as a girl will submit more easily to the male parent's will. If Dreiser had given Clyde a conditioning paralleling his own in this respect, the boy's failure

to absorb into his nature the moral stamina which his mother had, and tried to build in him, would have been more convincing. The old popular generalization about minister's sons has a sound basis in psychology.

Like Clyde, the youthful Dreiser hungered for luxury and social position, and he endowed the boy with the same fickleness towards the opposite sex that he had observed in himself. He gave him the same shallow and trivial set of values, the same awe in the presence of material comfort which, as he tells us in *Newspaper Days*, overcame him when he entered the office of the business manager who gave him his first newspaper job. "After a short wait I was permitted to enter the sanctuary of this great person, who, to me, because of the material splendour of the front office, seemed to be the equal of a millionaire at least. . . . 'See what a wonderful thing it is to be connected with the newspaper business!' I told myself."

Young Clyde was to ditch the sweet and trusting little factory girl, whom he had made pregnant, when the glamorous Sondra Finchley and the dazzling world in which she moved came within his reach; he was carefully and coolly to plot her death by drowning when she had become an insuperable obstacle to the things he craved. (Dreiser emphasizes in his telling of the tale that the actual capsizing of the boat was an accident, while at the same time he tells us how the girl's frantic, imploring face was lifted towards Clyde as he turned and swam to shore.)

The only tragedy, as I see it, in Dreiser's story is the girl's. She was caught in the web of inevitability. But Dreiser plainly meant his book to be the tragedy of two, and particularly the boy's, caught inexorably in the grip of forces which had made such an outcome possible. By implication, the quality of civilization in America must bear the burden of guilt. (It is not what you are, but what you have, that counts.) See, says Dreiser, how an attractive, life-loving, well-intentioned boy can, by force of the circumstances in which he was enmeshed, become a murderer—even a calculating, plotting murderer. See, too, how the course

of his trial and punishment by death (on which Dreiser passes no judgment, direct or implied) is also determined by what this civilization has done to the people in whose hands his fate is laid.

I have read the book twice, but I have never, from the first reading, been able to believe that Dreiser's theme is valid. My unbelief does not derive, it seems to me, from harshness of judgment; with each passing year I find it more difficult to see human beings in black and white, and harder to sit in judgment on their acts. But I think that Dreiser was guilty of an enormous fallacy. Clyde's course was *not* inevitable; the boy hadn't the seeds of manhood in him. He had a better start in life than many thousands of boys who became effective citizens and decent men. What happened to him is pitiable (for the boy suffered torment before and after his crime), but not tragic. And I hold it to be a very partial and wrong reading of American life to place upon it the onus for the crumbling of character in Clyde. You can't forge steel out of milk and water.

Is it logical to take as your symbol of American youth, blocked and warped by the society which surrounds it, "one of those interesting individuals (as Dreiser describes the boy Clyde) who looked upon himself as a thing apart—never quite wholly and indissolubly merged with the family of which he was a member, and never with any profound obligations to those who had been responsible for his coming into the world"? Why expect that such a lad, without his coming to grips with himself, should feel a sense of obligation towards other human beings outside his family?

Dreiser's thinking was never more confused and never more sentimental than it was in the writing of *An American Tragedy*. It is more serious here than in his earlier work, because this was the most ambitious theme he attempted. The results were deplorable, because Clyde Griffiths is the precursor of a long line of weak and rudderless young men who looked upon themselves as things apart. They were to multiply in our fiction like rabbits.

2

Some of Dreiser's earlier novels, within their more limited aim, were sounder stuff. That is true of his first, *Sister Carrie*, which is an honest, if somewhat tedious, piece of realism, and again of *Jennie Gerhardt*, written ten years later. It was true also of the ambitious trilogy, which he never completed, but whose two volumes, *The Financier* and *The Titan*, still constitute the most serious and perhaps the most effective effort in our fiction to chart the rise to power of an American magnate. If Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie* is one of the best studies in the American novel of moral deterioration, Cowperwood in *The Financier* and *The Titan* is the best study we have of the predatory quest for power in American business.

Dreiser's naturalism, which in him was undiluted, and to which he clung throughout his creative life, was derived both from his reading of its French originators and of those scientific and philosophical writers who convinced him early that the universe was a meaningless muddle, and man the helpless victim of forces that tossed him about like a cork in turbulent water. He writes in *Newspaper Days* that while still in his twenties he had the fortune to discover Huxley and Tyndall and Herbert Spencer, whose introductory volume to his *Synthetic Philosophy (First Principles)* quite blew me, intellectually, to bits. Hitherto, until I had read Huxley, I had some lingering filaments of Catholicism trailing about me, faith in the existence of Christ, the soundness of his moral and sociologic deductions, the brotherhood of man. But on reading *Science and Hebrew Tradition* and *Science and Christian Tradition*, and finding both the Old and New Testaments to be not compendiums of revealed truth but mere records of religious experiences, and very erroneous ones at that, and then taking up *First Principles* and discovering that all I deemed substantial—man's place in nature, his importance in the universe, this too, too solid earth, man's very identity save as an infinitesimal speck of energy or a "suspended equation" drawn or blown here and there by larger forces in which he moved quite unconsciously as

an atom—all questioned and dissolved into other and less understandable things, I was completely thrown down in my conceptions or nonconceptions of life.

He arrived at the definite conviction that

spiritually one got nowhere, that there was no hereafter, that one lived and had his being because one had to, and that it was of no importance. Of one's ideals, struggles, deprivations, sorrows and joys, it could only be said that they were chemic compulsions, something which for some inexplicable but unimportant reason responded to and resulted from the hope of pleasure and the fear of pain. Man was a mechanism, undevised and uncreated, and a badly and carelessly driven one at that.

It was a conviction he was never to shake off, and it was to colour all his writing. His mind was not sufficiently tough and his imagination not sufficiently supple to break through the confines which men like Huxley and Spencer and Haeckel had set to his thinking. He wandered through the long years that followed in an intellectual mist, groping and never finding, and always oppressed by the feeling of futility.

There is one other aspect of Dreiser's work and influence that needs to be touched on here. It is his preoccupation with sex and the manner in which he dealt with it in his novels. Here again he was both a liberating and an impeding force. He helped enormously to make possible the frank recognition in our fiction of the extent to which sex is a controlling factor in the behaviour of men and women. Our nineteenth-century novelists, in common with those of England, to whose apron strings our literature was still tied, had treated the subject gingerly. It has been pointed out that in all the twoscore novels by Howells neither adultery nor seduction is ever pictured; once, in *A Modern Instance*, he touched upon divorce, and, in the same novel, made his only study of a marriage discordant to the point of cleavage. Naturally, from such an incomplete reading of life, there was certain to be a violent and even an excessive reaction. It began, in its choice of theme, with Crane's *Maggie*; it was carried for-

ward, in theme, in situation, and in description, by Dreiser. Others, following in his wake, were to carry it still further than he, in each of these respects. The point was finally reached when almost all restrictions, including those imposed upon language, had been broken down.

I say "almost all," because even though the barriers have been lowered to admit the use in books, if not in newspapers and magazines, of the four-letter Anglo-Saxon words which once had the sanction of polite usage and could, conceivably, have it again; even though no situation is now regarded as too "indelicate" for inclusion in a novel, there nevertheless remain certain undefined bounds beyond which no writer, unless his purpose is deliberately pornographic, is likely to go. Even if he were so inclined, the most liberal-minded of publishers, when possessed of common sense and a feeling of responsibility towards the public, would act as a restraining influence. Nowhere in fiction admitted to general circulation has the description of sexual thoughts and acts been carried beyond the point to which Joyce carried it in Mrs. Bloom's soliloquy at the end of *Ulysses*. One can readily imagine pages which would exceed even the licence D. H. Lawrence permitted himself in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*—if, for example, a writer wished to reproduce the stream of obscenities which a depraved and angry woman is capable of uttering—but they are unlikely, I think, to be written (for publication, at least) by a mature and serious artist.

3

It might be profitable, before returning to Dreiser and the treatment of sex which he and those who followed him brought to American fiction, if we pursue a little further this whole matter of the degree to which the intimate relations of men and women are the legitimate concern of the novelist. There is no need at this date, I should imagine, to labour the point that, for both men and women, the satisfaction of the sexual impulse can

be the most potently constructive or destructive force in their lives. I say "can be" advisedly, because it not always is. The degree of stress to which the consciousness of sex subjects the individual person has a range as wide as mental capacity. For some, it is like a tumbling mountain torrent; for others, a placid, imperceptibly moving stream. And between the two extremes, there are all manner of gradations.

Certainly the manner in which the Victorians approached the sexual aspects of life was less than honest, both in their literature and in their living. Our reaction has its own ludicrous and immature attitudes, for we beat the tom-toms of sex like a small boy incessantly playing with the drum which has just been given him; but if we have been over-emphatic and over-insistent, we have on the other hand rid ourselves of such an absurd and hypocritical convention as the genteel dogma which conceived of all good women as submitting dutifully, but never with a shared delight, to the physical importunities of their men. Gradually, no doubt, we shall find our way to the more balanced and the more realistic view of the older and the more primitive civilizations, for it is in the intermediary stages that the balance is often lost.

The writers of the genteel tradition did not allow to sex sufficient weight in the determination of human conduct; they felt obliged to exclude from their novels situations which they, or we, for that matter, might regard as morally reprehensible. What we realize and insist upon to-day, of course, is that while it is important for the novelist to have a sense of moral values, it is equally important for him to feel free to deal with such a situation as an accepted part of life. As for the manner of his dealing with the situation (deliberate pornography aside), that becomes wholly a matter of artistic values.

Thus, in certain of its reticences in the matter of sex, the writers of the genteel tradition, whether consciously or not, were acting to better artistic purpose than many of those who wrote in the freedom acquired after the barriers had been broken down. I am not now thinking of plain speech, nor of the psycho-

logical factors involved in relations between the sexes, but of the descriptive detail concerning physical intimacy. John Galsworthy, whose practice in this respect I do not hold up as a model, for he was too much the product of his period and class to write with sufficient freedom, once said, in the volume of essays called *Candelabra*, something on the subject which has always struck me as eminently sane. It was not a moral pronouncement, but an artistic one:

To write grossly of sex, to labour in a story the physical side of love is to err esthetically—to overpaint; for the imagination of readers requires little stimulus in this direction, and the sex impulse is so strong that any emphatic physical description pulls the picture out of perspective. A naïve or fanatical novelist [he was thinking, no doubt, of D. H. Lawrence] may think that by thoroughly exploring sex he can reform the human attitude towards it, but a man might as well enter the bowels of the earth with the intention of coming out on the other side. If it were not for the physical side of love we should none of us be here, and the least sophisticated of us knows intuitively so much about it that to tell us more, except in scientific treatises, is to carry coals to Newcastle. But the atmosphere and psychology of passion are other matters, and the trackless maze in which the average reader wanders where his feelings are concerned is none the worse for a night-light or two.

It occurs to me that, although in the great Russian novels of the nineteenth century the range of human experience covered was wider than that of the English and American Victorians, no critic, so far as I am aware, has ever raised the objection that the element of sex was inadequately handled. Yet in *Anna Karenina*, for example, while presenting a situation which the novelists of our genteel tradition would have sidestepped, and while investing it with "the atmosphere and psychology of passion" to which Galsworthy referred, Tolstoy does not find it necessary or desirable to fasten upon his narrative the physical detail which so many lesser writers feel obliged to include.

Actually, I think, the genteel tradition's restraining hand upon the free functioning of the novel was not exercised so much through its manner of writing about life as through its determination to disregard certain of its elements. The men who broke through the tradition were valuable in what they contributed to the novel's development, not so much because of the *way* in which they chose to write as because of the much greater freedom they took in their choice of material.

If you are writing about a bore—a teller, let us say, of interminable and pointless stories—you defeat your purpose if you bring to your portrait of him a complete and literal transcription of his talk; you yourself become a bore. Ring Lardner, in one of his best stories, "The Golden Honeymoon," nearly overstepped the line in his account of one of those tedious recitals in which a man tells his assembled friends the details of his motor trip.

In all descriptive writing, whether of travel or people or food or sex, there is so much which the reader can supply himself, or which does not concern him, that a certain amount of selection and suggestion strengthens the picture and brings it into sharper focus; otherwise it is weakened and blurred by the introduction of an excessive amount of detail. That is why the insistence of some writers upon the reader's presence whenever one of their characters feels the need to perform a natural bodily function becomes so tiresome. We are all aware of Nature's little imperatives, and the writer does not need to labour them; we are not all so pompous as the judge whose brother said of him that he should always have, in plain view beside him on the bench, a roll of toilet paper, to remind him that he was a man like any other.

As for freedom in the choice of words (and here the only debated areas have been those of profanity and sex), there are, I think, only two considerations that we need bear in mind. One is that frankness of language, as employed in books, will generally go no further than the limits which ordinary, non-priggish people impose upon themselves in social intercourse at any given period;

nor is it possible to set standards which hold for everybody, because just as some people are more strongly sexed than others, so do they differ widely in their sensitivity to words, as they do to smells and sounds and tastes, and what is offensive to one is not at all to another. The texture of temperaments, like that of material fabrics, runs through many gradations of the finely and the coarsely grained.

The other consideration is that same need for a measure of selection and suggestion which I have already spoken of as an artistic essential of all descriptive writing. Anybody who has lived in intimate contact with men given to the excessive use of foul or profane language knows what a level of deadly monotony (except in the case of the imaginatively gifted few!) their habits of speech can attain. The writer who set himself to render verbatim the bunkhouse talk of lumberjacks or of buck privates in a gróusing mood would only disgust his reader and himself. Nothing requires a lighter or more imaginative touch in order to achieve the effect at which he aims.

Theodore Dreiser's touch, whether applied to sex or whatever, was neither light nor imaginative. He did literature a service in writing with a mixture of objectivity and sympathy about his Sister Carries and his Jennie Gerhardt, his Hurstwoods and his Cowperwoods, but he never succeeded in making more of their sexual urges than the blind mating of a pair of frogs. He wrote from a completely naturalistic bias, and love in his pages, as Carl Van Doren points out in his chapter on Dreiser in *The American Novel*, is merely "a flowing, expanding energy." In the case of his men, it is always a greatly diffused energy as well; from Hurstwood through Eugene Witla in *The "Genius,"* to Cowperwood in *The Financier* and *The Titan*, rampaging through life like a bull in rut, they find in the other sex a purely physical satisfaction. In Dreiser's view, all the restraints which society imposes are as nothing beside the imperative compulsions of the blood. And, as Mr. Van Doren remarks, he was likely, in dealing with the relations between men and women, to leave out of account "the

will and sense of women, and to represent them with few exceptions as kind wax to their wooers, with almost no separate identities till some lover shapes them. If he knew about women of the more resolute kinds he seldom wrote about them in love. Will in his novels almost altogether belongs to men." And will as shown among his men, it should be interpolated, was nothing more than the manifestation of a blind life force surging through them. They are the playthings of destiny, not the shapers of it.

So that in Dreiser the relationship between men and women remains on the simple animal plane. It is never complicated further except by the introduction of other purely material considerations, as when Sondra Finchley's attraction for Clyde Griffiths is enhanced by the luxury which surrounds her. Its nearest approach to anything more highly developed than the craving for these gratifications is in the sense of superiority which association with Sondra and her friends bestows upon him. Of the relationship between men and women as complementary human beings who, on the basis of physical attraction, help one another to reach a fuller self-realization, he had not the faintest conception. His view of sex, beyond the point of its basic level as a bodily function, was as empty as that of D. H. Lawrence, who saw it as essentially a bitter struggle between male and female to swallow or be swallowed, was negative. Plato, writing twenty-five hundred years ago, in one sentence plumbed deeper to the heart of the mystery than all those who have explored it since, when he said that the gods had separated man and woman and that ever since they had been striving to recover their union.

4

I have spoken of Dreiser at this length only because the study of his positive qualities and his defects, it seems to me, illuminates so much; and of the first, the most important, of course, is the sense and presence of life in his pages. It is a stunted, myopic sense, but even so, its presence in fiction is preferable to a nobler

conception of life that fails to convince because it is never reduced to living terms. This quality of Dreiser's, with all its attendant faults, is frequently found in the naturalists. It is the only gift, indeed, which they can bring us. From Flaubert and Zola down, they are rarely capable of humour, and when they are, it is humour of a grotesque kind, as in the case of Erskine Caldwell. It is not a humour which pervades life, as that of Dickens does. Nor can we look to them for beauty, or aspiration, or more than a limited measure of truth.

Historically, Dreiser gives place to Sherwood Anderson, in whom also the naturalistic bias was strong. There are aspects of his work which would warrant writing about him under another grouping, and, indeed, this will be true of many of the figures in this book; that is, to include them in a certain group is little more than a convenience. It is a great comfort to some minds to put the members of the human race into neat little categories, and nowhere has the practice been indulged to more irritating extremes than in the writing of literary history and criticism. I should like immensely to avoid the use of all pigeonholes, but unsatisfactory and unfair as the method often is, it provides a kind of frame by means of which the pictures on the wall may be more easily observed.

Perhaps the first thing to be said about Anderson is that, if anything, he was even more bewildered by life than Dreiser. The latter ended by simply taking up the position that he did not and could not know, and ceased to try. Anderson kept on trying, and ended by being still more muddled than when he began. That was because, I think, he wrote more subjectively than Dreiser, and it is for that reason he might with equal justification have been considered in the following chapter, which deals with those novelists who were primarily occupied with the exploration of their own personalities.

But the most important thing about Anderson is that, with the exception of Hawthorne and Henry James, he was, up to the time when he began to write, the only American novelist pri-

marily concerned with the inner lives of men and women, and the first to examine those lives in the light of the new psychology. Anderson cannot be discussed without reference to Freud and his explorations of the unconscious. While we do not to-day accept Freud's conclusions in their entirety, the fact remains that he added something valuable to the sum of human knowledge—just how much is still, among psychologists, a matter for debate. That Freud influenced greatly the course of fiction throughout the world, as well as that of other forms of literature, is not to be denied; it cannot, however, be maintained that his influence was wholly for good, or even, in the main, constructive.

Certainly, in the case of Anderson and of others, the effect of that influence, incompletely absorbed, and insufficiently rectified, was to confuse as much as to clarify. It resulted frequently in a distortion of emphases, as was the case particularly in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and his *Many Marriages*. As Mr. A. C. Ward has observed concerning the stories in *Winesburg*, there is among them "a disproportionate number of instances of thwarted sex-impulse, several of which are beautifully and movingly treated. But however ready we may be to agree that this motive is more frequent in human experience than is commonly realized and allowed, it remains true that if incidents of this character are withdrawn from *Winesburg, Ohio*, little is left—a reflection which must throw doubt upon the veracity of a book which sets out to be a record of everyday people." As Mr. Ward further observes, the stories in *The Triumph of the Egg* come nearer to fulfilling this intention, because they take note of a wider range of human impulses and problems. This is true also of the Tales in *Horses and Men*.

He is, in his best work, nearer to a true realism than Dreiser, for his naturalistic slant, which shows itself in his subordination of will, his amoral attitude, and his exaggerated individualism, is tempered by his realization of the complexity of human character and his awareness that aspiration is one of its components. But Anderson, like so many men of his period, and so many now,

found himself facing the dilemma which Ralph W. Sockman once referred to as the difficulty which man experiences in playing "the animal's part without the animal's unconscious acquiescence." He was above all interested in those who, like himself, were the victims of modern man's mental and spiritual confusion—"the misfits, the mutterers, the crazy rebels, the hallroom brooders," as Clifton Fadiman once described them. Fundamentally, he was of course, writing about himself, as any novelist who writes as subjectively as Anderson is, and as, indeed, all serious novelists, however objective they may strive to be, always are.

Thus, the over-all pattern of Anderson's novels (for in the short stories he succeeded to a greater degree in getting outside himself) is that of his own experience. Time and again, beginning with *Windy McPherson's Son* in 1916, he retold, with variations, the story of what might stand, in his experience, as the equivalent of religious conversion. When he was nearly forty, he withdrew from the prosperous business he had built up, feeling that he had betrayed himself in the concentrated quest for material success. In his *Notebook* he tells us that gradually he had succumbed to the idea that it would be "nice to be unknown, to slip quietly through streets, seeing life while remaining unseen and unknown." He left the Ohio town in which he had been living, took a job in a Chicago advertising agency, and began to write.

Much the same thing happened to Windy McPherson's son, who abandoned his wife and his executive job and vaguely set forth on a search for truth. Similarly, Beaut McGregor, in *Marching Men*, after a ruthless climb to position, experiences a revelation, and devotes his life to a vision of working-class solidarity. Hugh McVey, in *Poor White*, wins wealth in industry, only to feel himself frustrated by the dismal prospect of the machine age. In *Many Marriages* a washing-machine manufacturer revolts against his business life, abandons his family, and joins the search for truth. *Dark Laughter* is the story of another runaway who leaves his wife and his newspaper job because he had "a vague notion that he, in common with almost all American men,

had got out of touch with things—stones lying in fields, the fields themselves, houses, trees, rivers, factory walls, tools, women's bodies, sidewalks, people on sidewalks, men in overalls, men and women in motor-cars."

Nowhere in our fiction is there a comparable obsession of theme, unless it be Thomas Wolfe's obsession with the hunger for experience of Thomas Wolfe. Anderson, even more than Dreiser, fathered the procession of books by young men and women in the 'Twenties who were in revolt against their environments, against the "standardization" of American life, against the machine and the power of American business. Greenwich Village, one might say, was populated in his image. But Anderson found no cure for the cancer which seemed to him to be eating at the vitals of America. His one attempt, in *Perhaps Women*, was as confused a piece of writing as he ever did. In this novel he had come to the conclusion that "modern man cannot escape the machine, that he has already lost the power to escape." Not only that, but the machine was somehow making him impotent. But in women, perhaps, there was hope.

The woman, he wrote,

at her best, is and will remain a being untouched by the machine. It may, if she becomes a machine operator, tire her physically but it cannot paralyse or make impotent her spirit. She remains, as she will remain, a being with a hidden inner life. The machine can never bring children into the world. . . . If these machines ever are controlled, so that their power to hurt men, by making them impotent, is checked, women will have to do it.

They will have to do it perhaps to get men back, so that they may continue to be fertilized, to produce men.

As Mr. Ward asks, in his *American Literature: 1880-1930*, what does he mean by "it"? "Does he refer to sexual impotence, which obviously cannot be termed an imminent result of the machine while the birth-rate remains higher among factory labourers than among professors? Or does he mean 'spiritual' impotence, which is more reasonable, but has little to do with

the kind of 'fertilizing' he mentions?" It is a hopeless confusion, altogether characteristic of Anderson, and one from which he never emerged.

5

John Dos Passos, although he stands in the line of descent from Dreiser, and, like him, adopted a determined naturalism in his novels, was eventually to break through the confines of that attitude. He began writing as one of the group of Harvard aesthetes who were students in Cambridge during the years just preceding our entry into World War I, and his early work plainly reveals the division in himself between the dilettante and the socially conscious writer who was avid for direct experience of life in all its aspects, and ambitious to report faithfully what he had seen. As John Chamberlain has pointed out, he allowed his aesthetic side to control him only in his books of travel impressions, which contain some of his best writing. There, too, he permitted the poetry which is native in him, and which he carefully repressed in the novels, to emerge.

One thinks of Dos Passos first, perhaps, in connection with his *Three Soldiers*, the first American novel to impress upon us the bitterness and disillusion of the generation that went to France to "save democracy." It was published in 1921; a year earlier Dos Passos had brought out in England his first novel, *One Man's Initiation*, a weaker handling of the same theme, in which he drew upon his experiences as an ambulance driver in France to reflect the radical criticism of the war which he had heard; the same book gives rein to the aesthetic urge that prompts the young ambulance driver of the story to spend his leaves in contemplation of the French cathedrals. As Mr. Chamberlain observed, the early novels of Dos Passos, "in their constant fluctuation between the poles of Walter Pater and Emile Zola, . . . accurately reflect the same *Zeitgeist* that has pushed the 'exiles' of the 1920's from Dadaism to Revolution." *Three Soldiers*, which gave itself over

completely to a bitterly graphic report of the reactions to war of three boys who for varying reasons did not conduct themselves like heroes, was followed by *Streets of Night*, in which the aesthete had completely the upper hand.

Dos Passos's most effective use of the naturalistic method was to come in his *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and the three novels in which he panoramically surveyed American life through the first three decades of the present century. Successively entitled *The 42nd Parallel*, *Nineteen Nineteen*, and *The Big Money*, they were later published in one volume under the title *U.S.A.*

Manhattan Transfer is still the most successful attempt that has been made to reflect within the compass of a single work of fiction the multifarious life of New York. For this purpose Dos Passos employed a kaleidoscopic succession of scenes, in which a huge number of sketchily drawn characters from nearly every social stratum of the city are fleetingly glimpsed. For all its surface quality, no other novel has caught so well the seething vitality and enormous variety which are New York.

In spite of the able use of a kaleidoscopic technique in *Manhattan Transfer*, and the more elaborate technical devices which Dos Passos devised for *U.S.A.*, the interest of these novels is largely a documentary one. Nor is the documentation by any means complete, or even, for that matter, fully representative. Although Dos Passos, by virtue of his background and the supplementary excursions into the submerged levels of society which he made, was able to write convincingly of life among the rich and the respectable, the poor and the depraved (whether rich or poor), he was never to create a picture of American life that embraced both its best and its worst aspects, nor has he ever been able fully to create character. For all the naturalism of his approach, his people pass by like shadows on a screen. He never gets completely inside them; they remain symbols, drawn in a clear, hard outline.

Yet though the people of Dos Passos's world are never fully known to us, the things they do and those which they endure are vividly brought before us. It cannot be denied to his novels, any

more than to those of Dreiser, that they pulse with life. But it is a festering life, and its animation reminds us more of a squirming mass of maggots than it does of the hopes and despairs, the aspirations and betrayals, the evils and nobilities which are for ever entangled in the web of human living. There *was* life in America like that which he pictured in *U.S.A.*, as there is now, but there was other life as well, and Dos Passos is no more entitled to the wide claim of his title than if he had called his trilogy, with an even greater presumption, *Humanity*.

It must be granted him that in *U.S.A.* he was concerned, as no other contemporary writer of fiction was, with the dominant social tendencies in American urban life of the period; what he was after was the ground-swell upon which a multitude of American lives were borne. But I would unhesitatingly hazard the guess that Sinclair Lewis, who made no such effort at synthesis, whose approach to the American social scene was much more definitely particularized and restricted, will be read long after Dos Passos, for the chief quality by which fiction endures: in terms of life-size character Dos Passos has so far failed to produce a single figure that reaches to the shoe-tops of Babbitt.

The social range of *U.S.A.* is wider still than that of *Manhattan Transfer*; and in addition to the score or more of fictional characters, there are the interleaved biographies of the actual great figures who dominated the American scene. Most of them were strongly positive characters, greatly endowed with purpose and will, in contrast to the men and women whom Dos Passos creates; these are the playthings of the forces at large in American life. They are the creatures of the naturalist, and, for my own part, I think that Dos Passos refutes himself in his general purpose by the testimony offered in the biographies.

Mr. Chamberlain has written that "it is easy to read far-sighted calculation into Dos Passos's juxtaposition of the will-less common man and the dedicated Great." He asks, "Isn't the author trying to tell us, without becoming didactic and destroying himself as a novelist, that the 'little man' is damned because some-

thing (call it 'Fate,' call it the 'system,' call it what-you-will) comes between him and opportunity to use the products of the brains of the Great?" Perhaps he was, but if so, was it the truth? Certainly it was far from the whole truth. Dos Passos, I believe, tumbled into the trap that waits for all novelists who allow their books to be dominated by the conclusions of "social science." The opportunities for the individual have never "dried up" in the United States, except in the degree to which they have been curbed by governmental restriction, and that is a circumstance over which the "little man" can, if he will, exercise a measure of control. The American "success story" has never ended, however much the prophets of disaster insist that it has. Mr. Chamberlain reminds us that "*The Big Money* ends with a prose-poem to 'Vag,' an unidentified young man standing by the roadside while overhead flies a plane on its way to the Pacific Coast. The 'haves' are travelling *de luxe*; the 'have-nots' are compelled to hitchhike or to go by jalopy." But is that a situation peculiar to the 'Twenties? Have not the "haves" always travelled *de luxe*—the knight on his horse, the eighteenth-century aristocrat in his sedan chair, the commissar in his sixteen-cylinder car?

Mr. Chamberlain bids us observe (and I refer to him again because, although I do not agree with him entirely, I think his analysis of Dos Passos is the most penetrating that has been made) that the fundamental criticism which *U.S.A.* makes of our times is that of being shallow and rootless: "The characters of *U.S.A.* live not in relation to codes or values, but in relation to the headlines. Family life is conspicuously absent from the trilogy; human relationships are something to be snatched between wanderings on various missions. In becoming all eyes and ears, victims of the suggestibility of the radio, the newspaper, and the moving picture, mankind has lost its heart." It is, I think, a sounder indictment than the economic one. Yet even here, it seems to me that Dos Passos would not have weakened his thesis, but, on the contrary, strengthened it, if he had admitted to the picture which he labelled *U.S.A.* some glimpses of family life and

of human relationships which were something more than those of his book, and which indubitably were present in the country of which he wrote. There was, and is, a fair proportion of the American population who live a well-rounded and deeply satisfying family life, for whom friendship and love are not merely interludes between business conventions, and who do their own thinking in spite of the radio commentators, the syndicated columnists, and the synthetic concoctions of Hollywood. What is more, I believe that when several million young men return from abroad, they will do it in increasing numbers.

These are, I think, valid objections to Dos Passos's naturalism. As for the technical devices of *U.S.A.*—the biographies, the newsreels, suggesting background by means of newspaper headlines and popular songs, and the Camera Eye sections, which are the author's subjective recordings—Mr. Chamberlain rightly maintains that they are no more open to the charge of artificiality than "the Victorian trick of spattering novels with independent essay material." They are, also, rightly to be seen as the inevitable encroachment of the artist, which Dos Passos fundamentally is, upon the scientific attitude of the naturalist.

I remarked earlier that Dos Passos eventually broke through the limitations of the naturalistic approach. His *Adventures of a Young Man*, in which he satirized the American radical movement, introduces the element of moral conflict—in the struggle of young Glen Spotswood to orient himself in relation to the demands of the party line. Even so, the effectiveness of this novel is again vitiated by Dos Passos's failure to send blood pumping through the veins of his tragic young man; for all his agony of mind and spirit he remains a shadowy figure whom we really do not know. Both *Adventures of a Young Man* and *Number One*, the story of an American dictator which followed it, leave Dos Passos as a novelist precisely where he was, except for the one intimation of growth in *Adventures of a Young Man*.

It is not my intention in this book to make a comprehensive survey of the writers of the past quarter-century; I have chosen to write only of the outstanding figures, and to discuss their work chiefly for its bearing on the mood and temper of life and literature during that period. But there are three other writers, still in early middle life, who should be mentioned, however briefly, as among the novelists who trace their descent to Dreiser. They are James T. Farrell, Erskine Caldwell, and Richard Wright.

Long years of creative development may lie before them, and as with Dos Passos, who is several years their senior, one cannot be sure where the passage of time will lead them. Farrell, I think, shows a capacity for growth; Caldwell seems to be caught in a treadmill of his own devising; Wright has published too little to afford a basis for conjecture.

Farrell's kinship with Dreiser is close. Both began, to an even greater degree than most, as writers in bondage to their youth, impelled by an intense craving to free themselves from the drab and depressing backgrounds of their childhood. Dreiser never got away from the shadow cast by his early years, but Farrell may. *Studs Lonigan* and the companion series of novels about Danny O'Neill (*A World I Never Made*, *No Star Is Lost*, *Father and Son*, and *My Days of Anger*) are purgings of Farrell's own spirit, precisely as was, for totally different reasons, Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, or, for different reasons again, the autobiographical novels of Thomas Wolfe. It will be very interesting to observe Farrell's choice of a theme, now that he has finished with Danny O'Neill, so closely identified with himself. Studs Lonigan, one infers, is the boy James Farrell *might* have become under the impact of the South Chicago environment in which he grew up; Danny O'Neill is the boy he actually became. Thus Farrell shows himself to be a not uncompromising naturalist: the cards were stacked against Danny too, but there were in him sensibilities

and purpose which saved him from the surrender and deterioration of Studs.

Farrell shows hardly more interest in form than Dreiser, and he is almost equally inept in his feeling for words. He writes, purposely, perhaps, on a prevailingly dead level. This I take to be by intention where his fiction is concerned, because in his critical writing, some of which has been excellent, he uses a more supple and more variously accented prose. He has Dreiser's honesty and compassion and, when he gives it rein, a freer imagination. Like Dreiser, he lacks a selective sense, though here again, his piling up of detail may well be deliberate. If it is, I believe that his work is the poorer for it; both *Studs Lonigan* and the Danny O'Neill series would have gained greatly by vigorous pruning. And Farrell is never content, any more than Dreiser, to get his effects by suggestion; he is insistently literate and too often needlessly unpleasant. He is not so from any perverse desire to shock, for his concern is with truth; the trouble is that his unpleasant details frequently serve no purpose, and they merely distract the mind of the reader from Farrell's serious intention. If a writer believes there is something to be gained by making his readers uncomfortable, by making them more keenly aware of the evils he is trying to set before them, I think he is justified in pressing upon our attention facets of life from which we may instinctively shrink, but he must be careful not to defeat his own purpose.

Farrell can never be a simon-pure naturalist because he is what Dreiser was not, a moralist. He might deny the designation, but it is implicit in every book that he has written. Within the limitations of his method, and of his natural equipment as a writer (in which the element of poetry appears to be wholly lacking), he has, by his sincerity, his unshakable belief in the importance of what he was trying to do, and his very real identification with the harassed and meagre lives of his South Chicago people, added some unforgettable details to the picture of American life in our time. He may do much more; no individual literary future seems to be more difficult to predict.

In the case of Erskine Caldwell, I shall be surprised if he has not shot his bolt. As between the importance of his material and that of Dreiser, Dos Passos, or Farrell, there can be no comparison. Caldwell, both in his novels and his short stories, has used the most degraded and socially insignificant elements in the poor white population of the Deep South. The counterparts of his people exist, but they no more affect the balance of American life than the existence of the notorious Jukes family. They are, like many of Faulkner's people, as logically the inhabitants of the world of the Gothic romances as they are of the world of the naturalistic novelist. In their brutalities, in their complete amorality, they lend themselves naturally to that curiously sardonic humour which it is Caldwell's distinction to have introduced into American naturalism.

Unlike Faulkner, Caldwell is determinedly objective in his writing. Always he approaches his material from the outside. He is honestly and deeply concerned with the economic situation of the Southern sharecropper, and has written extensively about it outside his fiction, but in the novels and short stories his social purpose is blunted by his preoccupation with the horrible and the grotesque. He has a definite monotony of theme, in which the trinity of rape, lynching, and murder, with sadistic variations, is used over and over again.

I think it may be said of the humour of *Tobacco Road* that the human relations from which it rises are too pitiful for whole-hearted laughter, and at the same time so innately ludicrous as to make impossible a true emotion of pity. The humour comes a little more naturally to the surface in such a novel as *God's Little Acre*, 'but there, too, the comic quality depends on Caldwell's ability to repress the normal reactions to moral and physical degeneracy. Any reader who finds it difficult to submerge these reactions in himself is likely to find them blocking his perception of the comic element in Caldwell's stories.

He achieves a more unified effect in the short story form. In *God's Little Acre* there is combined in the same book a serious

handling of a labour situation in which one of the characters is involved, and in which he loses his life, and an almost farcical treatment of sexual degeneracy, to the end that his fundamental concern in the book is obscured. The same unresolved mixture of contradictory elements weakens his *Trouble in July*. As the central situation, you have a negro boy unjustly accused of an attack upon a degenerate white girl; he is lynched for a rape which he did not commit. Yet the emphasis in Caldwell's telling of the tale is upon a character who is presented to us in wholly comic terms—a lazy, time-serving sheriff. What might have been a truly moving study in the miscarriage of social justice becomes a blurred and inconsequential tale.

There is no promise of progression in Caldwell. In writing of his native Georgia he had endlessly repeated himself, and when he turned abruptly from his chosen material to write a novel about the Russia which he had visited, the result was a melodramatic hash.

The young negro novelist, Richard Wright, is the latest of those to adhere to the naturalistic method. His *Native Son* revealed an unquestionable talent for vivid and forceful narrative. The hosannas of praise which the book received upon its publication were as much, I suspect, the product of a keener awareness of and sense of responsibility on the part of the critics towards the racial problem with which it dealt, as they were of detached admiration for the author's skill. My own feeling about the book has been that its value both as a social document, an impassioned piece of pamphleteering, and as a novel was vitiated because its pages are scarred with hatred and its thesis blunted by its use of a much too singular and biased case-history. The negro boy Bigger Thomas was a poor example of his race, or of any race, for that matter, upon which to hang the exhortation implicit in the book. Bigger, so far as I could determine, was born mean; and if not actually a congenital criminal, at least a borderline case. In spite of its melodramatic force, *Native Son* was basically illogical, confused, and unsound. Unlike Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*, Wright's

novel made no effort to see around the problem, from the viewpoints of both negro and white; and yet negro, as well as white, must make that effort if a solution of their mutual difficulties is ever to be achieved.

With the writers discussed in this chapter, naturalism in the American novel has, I believe, spent itself. It has nowhere to go, nothing to give, beyond a few more facts in a world surfeited by facts. It is time now, not merely to correlate and interpret what the fact-finders have found, but to look for what they have never been able to supply—the vision without which the facts are but the lumber of an unbuilt house.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE HALL OF MIRRORS

I

As we have seen in the case of the naturalists, not even they, who strove so hard for objectivity in their reflection of life, were able to achieve it fully. Certainly not Dreiser, bound as by chains to the deprivations and the yearnings of his youth; certainly not Anderson, finding in all men the bewilderment and frustration by which he was himself bedeviled; certainly not Farrell, exorcising the ghosts of his Chicago boyhood, or Dos Passos, swinging between the contradictory poles of his own temperament.

For it is an inescapable truth that all novelists whose work has a true basis in human nature write, to a greater or less degree, about themselves. The bondage to his own temperament, environment, and inheritance imposes always on each writer a similar demand. Just as character is largely determined at a very early age by the combined forces of heredity and childhood conditioning, so does every serious writer give back in his work the reflection of those early years in which impressions were most indelibly received. They are the well from which every writer most deeply draws, no matter how wide the subsequent range of his adult experience. It is this, I think, which explains the fact that the opening chapters of autobiographies are so frequently the best.

To condemn fiction out of hand simply because it is obviously autobiographical in origin is to be both silly and obtuse. No material matches that provided by a writer's own experience. And that fact, of course, carries over into the novelist's creation of characters who bear no direct relation to himself. The living

figures of fiction are not created out of thin air; they are copies and composites of actual people who are part of the novelist's experience of life. And all these people who have come within the range of his own life experience and whom he uses as material for his books are unavoidably seen to a varying degree through the medium of his own personality. For is it not true that into our appraisal of those whom we love, as of those whom we despise or regard with indifference, we sometimes read qualities which are not intrinsically theirs, but our own?

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that these conditions which automatically impose themselves upon all fiction that undertakes a genuine reflection of life do not apply to the writer, let us say, of a thriller, whose work bears no direct relation to the life of actuality. The figures he creates are merely convenient symbols by means of which he carries forward the action of his tale. Psychology and fidelity to life are demanded of him only in the most rudimentary form. The subjective element in his work is reduced to the minimum. But not even he, obviously, can achieve an absolute objectivity, for every emotion, every thought which he ascribes to one of his characters, must pass through the medium of his own personality, to be coloured thereby in greater or less degree.

In a time like our own, in which various factors have united to greatly increase the habit of introspection among sensitively organized people, the amount of subjectivity in our writing has tremendously increased. And just as the habit of excessive introspection is undermining to the human personality, so is its resultant expression in literature, through the excessively subjective approach, an inherently destructive force. It was this condition which obstructed the full fruition of one of the finest talents in twentieth-century American fiction, that of Elizabeth Madox Roberts, resulting in the cloudy and confused quality of a book like *He Sent Forth a Raven*; at the same time, from her inward-turning eye came the philosophic flavour which she brought to the historical novel in *The Great Meadow*, and the

illumination of common life which she achieved in *The Time of Man*.

In order to preserve its sanity and health, literature must remain sufficiently objective, precisely as the individual needs the outlets provided by extraverted activity in order to keep his personality sound and whole. Is not one of the reasons for Tolstoy's immense fidelity to life—a quality in which all other novelists seem pale beside him—the extraordinary objectivity which he attained? It is true that had he been slightly more subjective there might have been in his work a larger infusion of poetry, using the word in its widest sense. The most intensely subjective of all the arts, poetry, as a component element of fiction can give it that lift and radiance which alone are lacking in the work of Tolstoy, the supreme realist.

Subjective though Sherwood Anderson was, to a degree beyond that which the other naturalists allowed themselves, it seemed fitting to discuss his work in connection with theirs, because he thought of his characters as caught in a vice in which they were as helpless as Dreiser's victims of environment: the forces of the unconscious were substituted by Anderson for those of society and of a universe heedless of man's fate. But we produced, in the 'Twenties, writers who may more profitably be regarded as typical of the intensely subjective approach, writers who were, like Anderson, to an extraordinary degree the victims of their own temperaments. I am thinking of Cabell and Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Wolfe: Cabell, who, in his fantasies, inhabited a dream world of his own making; Fitzgerald, the Narcissus of his literary generation, who was on his way to maturity when he died; Faulkner, whose dream world was a prolonged and feverish nightmare; and Wolfe, feeding interminably upon his own hunger.

James Branch Cabell, the Virginia gentleman who, while still a boy, drew maps of an imaginary land, that same Poictesme which

he was afterwards to populate with the creatures of his romances, is a writer whose work has always left me cold. I cannot read him with sufficient pleasure to make the effort seem rewarding. Perhaps this is because of some lack in me, though my indifference is not, I know, the result of an unconquerable aversion to fantasy, even if I must confess that I prefer to take my fantasy in poetry or in the theatre rather than in a novel. I can read, as I think most people can, second-rate realism with less restiveness than I can read second-rate fantasy, and particularly fantasy which has no roots in reality; and Cabell, beside a great fantast like Rabelais, or Cervantes, or Swift, whose imaginings had roots in the earth of their time, is pale indeed. It may be, also, that our age is incapable of great fantasy, precisely as the eighteenth century was incapable of great poetry. Cabell's work, for all its occasional sharp irony and wit, and its sometimes felicitous language, seems to me laboriously synthetic, and snickering in its naughtiness, where I would prefer robust and prodigal imagination and a wholesome vulgarity. A more glittering artificiality pervaded the fiction of two other writers of the period—Elinor Wylie, the jewelled quality of whose poetry turned to paste in her prose romances, and Carl Van Vechten, whose rococo confections seem as far from us to-day as the *Euphuës* of John Lyly.

How remote now seems the enthusiasm over *Jurgen* and the mingled shock and rapture with which it and Scott Fitzgerald's tales of the jazz age were received! Nobody caught better than Fitzgerald the feverish atmosphere of the period, and in the one work in which he was able to write about it with some degree of detachment—*The Great Gatsby*—he came closer to penetrating to the essential flavour and the empty core of the speakeasy era than any of his contemporaries. Ring Lardner mordantly satirized some of its aspects, and so, too, in at least one memorable scene—that of the party and Piggy Logan's circus at Mrs. Jack's—did Thomas Wolfe, but Fitzgerald was completely the child of the period; he was one of "All the sad young men." The phrase served as one of his titles, which, as Peter Monro Jack once

remarked, are among the best in fiction: *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, *Tender is the Night*.

Seen now in perspective, *This Side of Paradise* appears more baldly what it was—a gifted young man's self-dramatization. Amory Blaine, like Antony Patch in *The Beautiful and Damned*, was Fitzgerald's romantic projection of himself, just as many of the short stories that followed, even the best of them, like that amusing fantasy, "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," were projections of his craving for luxury and for all the bright baubles that seemed the end of living to the boys and girls of whom he wrote.

Talent Fitzgerald had in abundance. His perceptions were keen, his feeling for words innate, his imagination quick and strong. There was vitality in every line he wrote, but his early material was trivial, and like the youngsters of his fiction, he was himself rudderless; he had to get his own values straight before he could do the work for which he was fitted, and the process, never completed, took heavy toll of his vitality.

In *The Great Gatsby*, *Tender is the Night*, and the unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, which was posthumously published, he won through to a greater measure of objectivity than he had hitherto achieved. This was particularly true of *The Last Tycoon*, which made it clear that there was still growth in him when he died. *The Great Gatsby* is the fable of its period, and I believe it will be read when most of the novels of the 'Twenties are entirely forgotten. It will stand as one of a small group in which I would place Lewis's *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Arrowsmith*, and *Dodsworth*, Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*, *My Mortal Enemy*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, and Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *The Time of Man*, as comprising the 'Twenties' small packet for posterity. Fitzgerald's story of the Middle Western boy who rode his boot-legging racket to a showplace on Long Island, where his gardens were thronged with the fabulous parties of a new Arabian Nights, held within its little scope all the illusions which the 'Twenties cherished. They were, unlike those which the 'Twenties had

abandoned, cheap and tawdry illusions, and the iridescent bubble that was Gatsby's life burst in the air without a trace.

Tender is the Night, which followed eight years later, with nothing between but a succession of pot-boiling short stories, was a disappointing book. It had an ambitious theme: the story of the disintegration of a marriage, which was at the same time the story of the moral disintegration, in quite different ways, of the man and the woman. If the novel was unsatisfying in its treatment of the human relationships with which it was centrally concerned, it did, in its Riviera background, and its handling of the numerous minor figures, deftly convey the atmosphere of futility in which Fitzgerald's playboys and playgirls were wasting away their lives.

Of *The Last Tycoon* it may confidently be said that although Fitzgerald did not live to complete it, there is, in the little more than one hundred pages that he left, the best piece of creative writing that we have had about one phase of American life—Hollywood and the movies. Of all our novelists, he was by reason of his temperament and his gifts the best fitted to re-create that world in fiction. The subject needs a romantic realist, which Fitzgerald had become; it requires a lively sense of the fantastic, which he had; it demands the kind of intuitive perceptions which were his in abundance. He had lived in Hollywood long enough to write from the inside out, and within brief space, he had created a memorable figure in Monroe Stahr, the brilliant young producer who was Fitzgerald's most fully realized character; he had marvellously conveyed the atmosphere in which a mammoth American industry is conducted; and he would have ended, we can see, by bringing it clearly into focus as a world of its own within the larger pattern of American life as a whole. As Edmund Wilson observed in the Foreword which he wrote for the book, the main activities of the people in Fitzgerald's earlier stories "are big parties at which they go off like fireworks and which are likely to leave them in pieces," whereas the parties in *The Last Tycoon* are incidental and unimportant. The book is a tragic fragment,

for it revealed a Fitzgerald approaching a long-delayed maturity. His craftsmanship was already sure, but his grasp upon life was not.

3

I suppose no other literature can count as many abortive or truncated careers among its novelists as our own. Our literary history of the last forty years is strewn with the wrecks of talent and genius. Seldom has there been a steady growth towards mastery of craftsmanship which has been accompanied by a corresponding maturity of attitude. For one reason or another that dual growth has been more frequently evident in the work of our women writers than in that of the men. It is a phenomenon that teases one into speculation, and presently I shall venture a few conjectures of my own as to the possible reasons.

Certainly it is a phenomenon which holds true for most of the writers whom we have thus far discussed; indeed, I would even venture the opinion that there is only one man in creative American literature to-day who has moved serenely forward both in his art and his understanding of life, and that is Robert Frost. How many young men have produced a promising book or two and then fallen silent; how many have gone on, floundering in the morass of their own confusion—the Sherwood Andersons, the Faulkners, the Thomas Wolfes.

Here is William Faulkner, potentially one of the ablest writers of his generation, hopelessly, as it seems to me, involved in his own technical virtuosity, and blocked by his preoccupation with the pathological ills of mankind. No American writer's name has been more frequently coupled with that of Dostoevsky, but Faulkner has never been able to balance the man-God against the man-beast as the Russian did. Dostoevsky was as aware as Faulkner of the darkly evil in human life, but it did not engulf him as it has the strangely agonized romantic of Mississippi. Faulkner has written some of the most powerful scenes in American fiction, some of its most beautiful as well as some of its most tortured

prose, but he has not been able to give meaning to his work. The world which he has created is as palpably unreal in its way as the world of Cabell. If one were to make a prolonged visit to a hospital for the insane, talking at length to its inmates, one would have as balanced a view of a cross-section of humanity as one receives from the fiction of Faulkner.

In the entire range of his work—twelve novels and several volumes of short stories—there is not a single instance, so far as I can recall, of a normal and mature relationship between a man and a woman. Every such relationship remains on an infantile, depraved, or, at the best, an adolescent level. You may search his novels from end to end without finding a single family in which the relationships are not twisted either by perversion or insanity. The vital currents of life are stepped up in his pages to an unparalleled intensity, so that sexual intercourse is conducted always on the level either of rape or of nymphomania. It is a nightmare world, wearing a mask of reality. Is it any wonder, then, that in spite of quantities of solemn critical discussion and ecstatic praise, not one novel by Faulkner (generally accepted as one of the major American writers of his time) has been bought by as many as ten thousand persons, with the single exception of *Sanctuary*, a cheaply meretricious book, which he confessedly wrote as a shocker? There is nothing in *Sanctuary* to repay an intelligent reader, though there is plenty to titillate adolescent minds, whereas in Faulkner's other books there are pages of genuine power or beauty which are like the rational moments of a demented man.

Rather than take space to enumerate the themes employed by Faulkner in his novels, I think it would be more amusing, equally just, and no less illuminating, to reprint the summary which Clifton Fadiman made of *Absalom! Absalom!* in his review of what is generally regarded as one of Faulkner's important novels. It covered, in point of time, a larger segment of American life than any other and was, indeed, his most pretentious book. Mr. Fadiman wrote:

The story runs from 1807 to 1910, with the major action concentrated between 1833, when Thomas Sutpen appears in Jefferson, Mississippi, and 1869, when he is rather regretfully murdered by an old family retainer. Thomas Sutpen is a monomaniac, known familiarly to the other characters as The Demon. . . . The Demon's second wife, Ellen Coldfield, gives birth to two children, Henry and Judith, goes dotty, and dies after a while. Her younger sister, Rosa, is insulted by The Demon and also goes dotty, though it takes her much longer to die. The father of Rosa and Ellen goes nuts when the Civil War arrives, nails himself up in a garret, and perseveringly starves himself to death. Now, young Henry, upon finding out that his best friend, Charles Bon, engaged to be married to his sister Judith, is (a) his half-brother and (b) part negro, also goes dotty in a complicated way, and finally shoots Charles dead. By the end of the story Henry has been reduced to straight, simple idiocy and is kept shut up in the attic. Judith, after some years passed in a vacant-eyed trance, passes out as a result of small-pox, a death so natural as to strike rather a jarring note.

Now, there is no doubt that Faulkner has been painfully conscious of the decay of the old aristocratic Southern tradition in which he himself was nurtured, that he had observed with something like mingled fury and dismay the going to seed of some of the old families and the brutally forceful thrust for power of the formerly submerged poor whites; it is plain that he detests the Northern industrialism which shattered the pattern of life the old South had established. These reactions, so keenly felt by him, he has permitted to confuse and distort the social content of his novels, which I think has frequently been discussed with too great seriousness. Other factors contributed to the warping of Faulkner's mind: his experience of war for one, and whatever caused his bitterly malignant attitude towards women, expressed over and over again in his portraits of them, for another.

Alfred Kazin, in his *On Native Grounds*, acutely observes that "the violence of Faulkner's novels is, at bottom, not the violent expression of a criticism of society, but the struggles of a sen-

sibility at war with itself." There is more to Faulkner's harshly over-accented picture of his milieu than his domination, as Maxwell Geismar suggests, by "the historical Southern myth." A man does not portray the modern South "only in terms of bestiality" merely because he resents the impact of the industrial age on the society into which he was born. That, to my mind, is merely another example of the constant over-emphasis of sociological and economic forces in our contemporary criticism—an over-emphasis which reached its ridiculous apogee in the Marxian interpretation of literature a few years back, but of which a few tattered remnants still remain. "Economics and art," Willa Cather once remarked, "are strangers." That, too, may be over-emphasis, but it is a hundred times nearer the truth than the contention that they are rigidly reciprocal. Miss Cather, writing in *The Commonweal*, continued:

The condition every art requires is not so much freedom from restriction, as freedom from adulteration and from the intrusion of foreign matter; considerations and purposes which have nothing to do with spontaneous invention. The great body of Russian literature was produced when the censorship was at its strictest. The art of Italy flowered when the painters were confined almost entirely to religious subjects. In the great age of Gothic architecture sculptors and stone-cutters told the same stories (with infinite variety and fresh invention) over and over, on the faces of all the cathedrals and churches of Europe. How many clumsy experiments in government, futile revolutions and reforms, those buildings have looked down upon without losing a shadow of their dignity and power—of their importance.

Faulkner's work is fundamentally meaningless because there is no interaction in it between good and evil, to the end that the mystery of human life is absent from his writing. One reads Faulkner as one watches, fascinated, while a cobra swallows a black snake. Both exhibit the same intensity, and one is about as significant as the other.

4

Thomas Wolfe was keenly conscious of the autobiographical character of his fiction, and hotly resentful that it should be minimized on that account. He was right, of course, in his insistence that the presentation of life in fiction is basically an autobiographical process; the degree of his failure was in his continued inability to transmute his life experience into terms dissociated from his own personality. Beginning with *Look Homeward, Angel* in 1929, and continuing with *Of Time and the River*, *The Web and the Rock*, and *You Can't Go Home Again*, he wrote primarily of what had thus far happened to Thomas Wolfe. The first book was the story of his childhood and youth in Asheville, North Carolina, in which he drew the portraits of his mother and his father large as life; the novels that followed, condensed and pieced together like the first, with the help of his editors, from the conglomerate mass of words that poured from him in a ceaseless stream, carried on the story of Tom Wolfe after he left home: his life in Cambridge, where he studied playwriting under George Pierce Baker at Harvard; in New York, where he taught English at New York University; in Europe, to which he made several visits. He told in great detail and under the thinnest disguise the story of his infatuation with the stage designer who was his mistress (she reciprocating with a novel in which she gave her own version); he drew life-size portraits of his friends, giving them merely new names. Some of it was the bombastic rhetoric of a boy drunk with words, some was magnificent writing; all of it was vibrant with life.

It was not until the posthumously published and incomplete novel, *The Hills Beyond*, written in the year before his death at the age of thirty-seven, that we were given any assurance of what Thomas Wolfe might have become as an objective novelist. He has at last, I think, broken through the bounds of that enormous interest in himself—an interest which is naturally intense in every creative writer, but which was magnified tenfold in the case of

Wolfe—and was on his way to that true release of his creative power which he had deceived himself into believing he had achieved at least once before. For he had written of his third novel, *The Web and the Rock*, that “it marks not only a turning away from the books I have written in the past, but a genuine spiritual and artistic change. It is the most objective novel I have written. I have invented characters who are compacted from the whole amalgam of and consonance of seeing, feeling, thinking, loving and knowing many people.” But had he? Certainly the central figure, now called George Webber, is actually the Eugene Gant of the preceding books, slightly dwarfed in physical stature; and practically all the characters entering the episodes of the latter half of the story are people completely identifiable under changed names, whom Wolfe met during his first years in New York.

Wolfe's natural equipment as a novelist was superb. He reacted to life like a giant sponge, but one, unfortunately, unable to assimilate all it absorbed. He had, to a degree certainly unsurpassed, and probably unequalled by any other novelist in our history, the faculty of total recall. One wonders if Wolfe ever experienced a sensation which he forgot, if ever an impression was registered on his senses which he did not retain and which he could not reproduce. His sensory receptiveness was as acute and all-embracing as Tolstoy's. But he was overwhelmed by the flood of his impressions, by the intensity of his emotional reactions. He was no more able to control and direct the flow of his torrential self-expression than a volcano is able to control and direct the flow of its lava. It would be difficult to over-emphasize the degree to which Wolfe was dependent upon the assistance given him by his editors. Readers unacquainted with the publishing world do not know how much the novels they read frequently owe to the ministrations of these anonymous craftsmen. Wolfe's case, of course, was exceptional; his novels might never have seen the light of day had it not been for the patience and understanding, the unremitting work and critical sense of Maxwell Perkins and Edward Aswell, the two editors who cut and transposed and

hammered Wolfe's mountainous and jumbled material into publishable form. He was incapable of giving it pattern and shape himself. More than once, when he was asked to work over a section of his manuscript and reduce its length, he brought it back longer than before.

In Wolfe, gusto and the craving for experience were close to the pathological. He felt that he must read *all* the books that had ever been written, that he must know *all* of America, almost that he must know all of the people in it. In the years just before his death he began to realize the impossibility of his desire, and he began, also, to think as well as feel. Unhappy though he was a great part of the time, tortured by the difficulty of absorbing all that he felt he needed to absorb, driven by a demoniac urge to orient himself in life, to find, in his own words, "the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united," he nevertheless retained and showed in his work his belief that life is good as well as evil, that "it is savage, cruel, kind, noble, passionate, generous, stupid, ugly, beautiful, painful, joyous." In that at least he had the viewpoint of a great novelist, who must know and who must indicate that life is all these things.

He had other essential qualities as well. In spite of his self-absorption, he had a huge interest in other people, he could make you see them, he had sympathy and compassion. Spiritually unanchored though he was, he was yet capable of flashes of true wisdom, as when he wrote of pity that, more than any other feeling,

it is a "learned emotion": a child will have it least of all. Pity comes from the infinite accumulation of man's memory, from the anguish, pain and suffering of life, from the full deposit of experience, from the forgotten faces, the lost men, and from the million strange and haunting visages of time. Pity comes upon the nick of time and stabs us like a knife. Its face is thin and dark and burning, and it has come before we know it, gone before we can grasp or capture it; it leaves a shrewd, deep wound, but a bitter subtle one, and it always comes most keenly from a little thing.

The first indications of Wolfe's approach to maturity were contained in the first of the posthumously published books, *You Can't Go Home Again*. The title derived from the last line of *The Web and the Rock*, and it had, for Wolfe, many implications. "In a way," he wrote of George Webber, who is himself in both these novels, "the phrase summed up everything he had ever learned." In the last analysis, it means, of course, that one must constantly go forward in life, and the application holds in *You Can't Go Home Again*, beyond the individual; it holds for the world of man as a whole. We have come to the end of something, to the end of much, in our time, says Wolfe, but we can't go home again, we must go forward. "I believe that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found." The book opens as George Webber's first novel is about to be published (*Look Homeward, Angel*), in 1929, and it closes with his visit to the Germany he had loved, and where he is now shocked into the realization that something abysmally evil and corrupt has entered the world, something that must be destroyed if men are once more to be proud and free. In between there is the most vital and damning picture of American life (so far as it is visible in New York) during the Great Depression years, that our fiction contains. The New York of the period immediately before the crash of 1929 and the years directly after is subjected to a fierce illumination. All of Wolfe's superb ability to transfix a scene, whether a casual incident or one freighted with portentous implications, such as that of the Jacks' party and the ensuing fire in the great Park Avenue apartment house, is here employed. The inanity of Piggy Logan's puppet circus, receiving rapt attention in a world gripped by the forces of evil and destruction, is satire of a masterly kind.

The Hills Beyond, which, with the exception of one chapter, was written and rewritten in the months immediately preceding Wolfe's death, was set down by a man who, in his own words, felt that he was through with "lyrical and identifiable personal autobiography." In this book he aimed to tell the story of his forebears. He found that most of what he knew that was actual about them he had already used in earlier books, and most of the people who

appear in *The Hills Beyond* are not patterned after real members of the Gant and Pentland families. But they are, or would have become, full-bodied creations. Old William ("Bear") Joyner, who came into the mountains with a Revolutionary land grant in one hand and a rifle in the other, was hewn from the family tree, but the sons and grandsons who carry on the story were not. Zachariah, that fine figure of a homespun politician; Rufus, the acquisitive; Theodore, the histrionic professional Confederate warrior; Robert, the upright judge—these and others were creatively drawn. Beyond the increasing ability to project character outside himself, there was a surer grasp of the meaning of American experience, visible in his evocation of the significance of the county court house in American life and his penetrating analysis of the American attitude towards lawyers and the law, so different from that of any other people on earth.

It is deeply regrettable that Thomas Wolfe did not live to finish this book, and to write others. I may be wrong in my belief, I may be reading too much between the lines, but I think that at the time when death overtook him Wolfe was coming to terms with himself, that his unappeasable hunger was no longer the torment that it had been, that he was beginning to see himself more clearly in relation to his world.

5

Why, to return to the question I raised a few pages back, are so many American writers late in reaching maturity, why do so many fail to arrive there at all? Why, as a matter of fact, have European and Eastern visitors so commonly spoken of the prolonged adolescence of the American man? Why are the same phenomena not so frequently evident among American women writers, among American women in general? I don't know, but I suspect that the answer may lie in the rise of the American matriarchy. American men are mothered to a degree beyond what is usual among any other people, not only by their mothers but by their teachers and their wives as well. In what other country are boys in their most impressionable years so prepon-

derantly taught by women? Where else is the expression "tied to his mother's apron strings," or its equivalent, so commonly in use as among ourselves? Where else but in the United States do you find a convention hall full of husbands behaving for all the world like so many schoolboys playing hookey? To return for a moment to Thomas Wolfe: the dominating and aggressive figure of his mother casts a longer shadow in his books than that of his oratorical father. How dependent he was upon her, long after he had left home, is evident on every page of his letters. The homesickness of the boys who have been sent overseas in this war, so acute that it has been one of the major problems with which commanding officers have had to deal, is not a normal reaction for boys in their late teens and twenties; it was stronger this time than last, stronger by far than in the Civil War. I think the change did not begin to set in until the American family began definitely to shrink in size, and the maternal instinct began to operate in more concentrated form; it is an instinct that must be satisfied, in one way or another, in the overwhelming majority of women, and when the channel is narrowed, as it has been, an overflow must follow as a matter of course, so that American sons and American husbands, during recent generations, have been smothered under its intensive force.

How much of an impediment to the development of American writers this condition has been I cannot presume to judge. Certainly there have been other, more easily measurable factors: the lure of motion-picture rights, and of Hollywood salaries, to the end that too many novels have been written with an eye cocked at the screen; the increasing role of the literary agent who, with his own financial interests primarily in mind, has too often persuaded the young writer to trim his sails to the prevailing market winds. Add to these the conviction among so many writers who feel, as Scott Fitzgerald did, that life in the United States is unendurable with an income of less than 20,000 dollars a year, and there is little ground for wonder that so much promise has been unfulfilled.

CHAPTER SIX

THE TOUGH GUYS

I

IT still remains to be seen whether the writer who exerted the strongest influence on the fiction of his younger contemporaries during the late 'Twenties and the 'Thirties—I refer, of course, to Ernest Hemingway—will be numbered among those who gave promise of more than they fulfilled. When, in 1937, after a lapse of eight years, he published his third novel, there seemed good reason to believe that he had run his course as a creative writer. He was then almost forty years of age, and he had just written a book, *To Have and Have Not*, which, on the level of the thought and emotion which informed it, could be described only as adolescent. But three years later, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway gave ground for hope that he was growing. He is now forty-six, and he should be entering the period of his greatest capacity.

When I speak of growth in Hemingway, I mean growth in his attitude towards life, and in his conception of the writer's function in dealing with it. His growth in technical mastery has been steady and impressive; no writer of his generation has more consistently or more determinedly striven for perfection in his art. No living writer has more profoundly influenced the writing of prose narrative in our time. He set for his mark an absolute naturalness, both in narration and in dialogue. At times he has achieved it, and as he has gone on, he has little by little eliminated the artificialities by which it was marred. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, except for the difficulties created by his attempt to transfer the qualities of Spanish speech to English, they are not present at all. There are scenes in that book which, in their descriptive

strength, surpass all others in Hemingway. The telling of how the Civil Guard was shot in Pablo's town, and how the fascists were beaten and thrown to their deaths, has the thrust and power of one of the more terrible of Goya's pictures.

What Hemingway was aiming at in his use of words was wholly evident in the first collection of his short stories, *In Our Time*. They have commonly been described as already showing mastery, but that, I think, is an exaggeration. If one takes the trouble to go back to them, it will be apparent that in many passages the effort to achieve simplicity and naturalness burlesques itself; there are sections which read like pages from a book for boys in which the writer is trying very hard not to tax the reader's capacity. One becomes aware of the artifice, and the effect is spoiled. Later, by means of more variation in his sentence structure and subtler rhythms, Hemingway succeeded in avoiding this.

I have always felt that the famous Hemingway dialogue was much overpraised, and it is interesting to observe how greatly it has been modified in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The uniformly laconic character of the conversations in Hemingway's earlier books made for a kind of matter-of-factness that created an effect of reality, but if you read much of them at a time it becomes apparent that everybody talks alike, and that the stripped quality of Hemingway's dialogue is far from the actual flavour of ordinary speech. But in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* both the length and the rhythms of individual speeches are allowed a much greater variety than in the earlier books. Here, as in the actual narrative itself, the method by which effects are achieved becomes considerably less obtrusive. Hemingway's uniformly short declarative sentences had the appeal of novelty, not because they created a new prose style, for it was a style, as he first used it, duplicated in reading primers and in many books for children, but because it was applied to material intended for adult consumption. Similarly, too, he has modified the monotony of the "he said" and "I said" appended to each remark, which he had adopted in the effort to escape the artificiality of too obviously manufactured variants.

No writer, perhaps, ever foreshadowed more completely in his first book the themes which were henceforth to occupy him. As Edmund Wilson pointed out in the Preface he wrote for a new edition of *In Our Time*, "it has the whole of Hemingway in it already." Here is the macabre sketch, the theme of dead love, maudlin conversations over drink, the feeling good through the senses, the bullfight, the preoccupation with violent death. Here even, in miniature, with a more cynical ending, is the story of *A Farewell to Arms*.

Hemingway's work reveals him as a man of an essentially romantic temperament upon which his early life experience imposed certain attitudes in opposition. As several of the stories in his first book attest, his boyhood in the woods of Michigan brought him up against life in its primitive and brutal aspects; and these, followed shortly by his experience of war, provoked questions in his mind which he had not yet the maturity to answer. His pessimism remained the romantic pessimism of adolescence, as when he wrote of Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*:

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one, and afterwards many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very gentle and the very good and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.

That is, I think, anything but a mature and logical criticism of life; it is a purely romantic conception of human fate. "The world" becomes a wholly malignant symbol. But, as Anatole France remarked in *The Garden of Epicurus*, "When we say life is good, life is evil, we are stating a meaningless proposition. We ought to say it is good and bad at one and the same time, for it is through it, and it alone, we have the idea of good and bad at all."

It has been pointed out by more than one critic that Hemingway's men and women do not plan; things happen to them. As John Peale Bishop has observed:

There are actions, no lack of them, but, as when the American lieutenant shoots the sergeant in *A Farewell to Arms*, they have only the significance of chance. Their violence does not make up for their futility. They may be, as this casual murder is, shocking; they are not incredible; but they are quite without meaning. There is no destiny but death. It is because they have no will and not because they are without intelligence that the men and women in Hemingway are devoid of spiritual being.

In the most callous book he has written, *To Have and Have Not*, this conception of life betrayed Hemingway completely. and made his story seem childish in the weakness of its logic. Harry Morgan, strong, courageous, ruthless, is here the man to whom things are done. Hemingway presents him as a victim of economic circumstance, one who believed himself strong enough to meet the world single-handed. He holds to that belief until he lies, shot through the stomach, on his deathbed, where he mumbles that no man alone has a chance. But Morgan, so far as we can discover from the story, has never made an effort to live within the law. He has killed without compunction, in cold blood; he has never made up his mind to evade the way of life which has made likely the end to which he has come. There is no tragedy here, no meaning, merely a succession of brutal actions. Because Harry Morgan's story is empty of moral conflict, it becomes equally empty of significance. It is quite evident that he intended this novel to have social implications; Morgan's dying words are a bitter criticism of society, but it is a criticism which has no point because Hemingway failed to provide any basis for justifiable sympathy towards Morgan. There is no reciprocal obligation between society and the individual; Harry Morgan recognizes only society's obligation towards him.

The insistent blending of malignant fate with a basically romantic attitude repeats itself in Hemingway again and again. The characters in his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, are romantically aware of themselves as "a lost generation." Thoreau once declared, in one of those striking half-truths which arrest the eye,

that most men lead lives of quiet desperation; the unhappy expatriates of Hemingway's novel, striking a bravura pose, envelop themselves in an atmosphere of absolute futility. Hemingway depicts them with a hard brilliance; we observe them with a curious sort of fascination—their casual couplings, their interminable drinking, their sophisticated savagery in their relations with one another, and even as we watch we are conscious, if we are honest with ourselves, that this is not life, but a romantic projection of it.

The disillusionment in which so many of Hemingway's generation were absorbed is more consciously and consistently set forth in his work than in that of any of his American contemporaries. Lieutenant Henry sounds the keynote of that disillusionment in *A Farewell to Arms*:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them standing sometimes in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity.

From this feeling it was an easy and understandable, though not a logical, step to the distrust of all emotion, except on the simplest, most primitive plane. Refuge was to be found only in the physical satisfactions—in eating, drinking, making love, in the pursuit of action for action's sake. When one of the characters in *To Have and Have Not*, seeking for the ultimate insult with which to taunt her husband, flings at him, "You writer!" one feels that Hemingway would not respect himself were he not, outside his professional activity, the red-blooded individual who shot the kudu in Africa and landed big game-fish off the Florida keys. Hemingway's glorification of the primitive leads him into a strange

inconsistency, and we find that up to the writing of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* the only times he permits himself to recognize the existence of spiritual values are those in which he contemplates the infliction of violent death. He tells us in *Death in the Afternoon* (he is speaking of matadors), "A great killer must love to kill; unless he feels it is the best thing he can do, unless he is conscious of its dignity and feels that it is its own reward, he will be incapable of the abnegation that is necessary in real killing. . . . [He] must have a spiritual enjoyment at the moment of killing."

Could any statement aiming at profundity be more false and confused? Is not the dignity in death, and not in the killing? Where is the abnegation—a word from which, in any other application, Hemingway would resolutely have shied away? He goes on to say that "killing cleanly and in a way which gives you aesthetic pleasure and pride has always been one of the greatest enjoyments of a part of the human race," forgetting that the "aesthetic pleasure and pride" entered the picture only when killing became a sport with a developed technique. Primitive man killed because he needed food or needed to protect himself.

Again, in the same book, he relates how once, after seeing a matador gored by a bull, he woke in the night trying to remember

what it was that seemed just out of my remembering and that was the thing that I had really seen and, finally, remembering all around it, I got it. When he stood up, his face white and dirty and the silk of his breeches opened from waist to knee, it was the dirtiness of the rented breeches, the dirtiness of his slit underwear and the clean, clean unbearably clean whiteness of the thigh bone that I had seen, and it was that which was important.

Concerning this passage Max Eastman has justly asked, "Is the clean whiteness of a man's thigh bone the 'important thing' to a poet working for the feeling of life and death, or is it merely the most shocking thing, and therefore the most sought after by an ecstatic on the rapture of killing?"

Such, then, was the mental confusion and the complete loss of

values in which Hemingway was caught during the years he was attitudinizing in *Death in the Afternoon* and *Green Hills of Africa*, so that when he came to the writing of his next novel, he could produce as meaningless a story as *To Have and Have Not*. What more was to be expected of a man who had so far found for himself no other base than a conviction that "about morals I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and judged by these moral standards, which I do not defend, the bullfight is very moral to me because I feel very fine while it is going on and have a feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality, and after it is over I feel very sad and very fine." He had come to inhabit a world in which sensory experience is the only yardstick and the only source of happiness.

Even in *A Farewell to Arms* it had been difficult to find any basis for the love between Lieutenant Henry and Catherine Barkley other than their mutual pleasure in sleeping together. Like most Hemingway characters, we know amazingly little about them; we are made sharply conscious of their moods, of their sensory satisfactions, but can any reader of *A Farewell to Arms* tell what Lieutenant Henry is really like as a person; can anyone say that Catherine Barkley reminds him of someone whom he knows? They are abstractions to whom certain things happen; they have neither physical identity nor traits of character. It is not until one comes to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—and even there one must except Robert Jordan and the girl Maria—that we find people who are not, like the horrible creatures of the Grimm fairy tale, hollowed out in the back. In the woman Pilar, earthy and strong, tender, hard, wise, a woman who, as she says of herself, would have been a good man, and yet was a woman made for men; the brutal, unstable Pablo, in whom strength and evil were combined; the good and brave old man Anselmo—these are the most fully realized individuals in Hemingway's writing.

✓ The novel demands a concentration upon character—which is its very cornerstone—that Hemingway has not reached and which, indeed, may never be his; and the most satisfying novels, from the standpoint of character creation, are obviously those in which we see people develop and change, for better or worse, as we see them do in life. There is not a character in Hemingway who is not static; as we meet him in the beginning, so is he at the end, with the sole exception, perhaps, of Pablo in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. They do not change because there is nothing in them to change. They react to stimuli, but they have no inner life.

By technique alone—and Hemingway has plenty—plus imagination, as in Poe, or plus sensory awareness, as in Hemingway himself, it is possible to go much further in the short story than in the novel. It is largely for that reason that Hemingway's short stories, in their entirety, are convincing to a degree that his novels, in their entirety, never are. It is sufficient in a short story to transfix and hold a mood, to convey a fleeting impression, to register a simple reaction to a single circumstance. This Hemingway has done over and over, in the best of his short stories, with masterly economy and driving force. But the novel takes a long view; it deals with life, not in an arrested moment, but in the flow of days and months and years. It demands perspective, and cognizance of the slow accretions of good or evil that build up within a human being, and by which he is undermined or fortified. A novel satisfies us most when it produces in us something of the same effect that we feel when we watch a great river flowing past, and it leaves with us the same sense of continuity, of life unending. Hemingway comes closest to that effect in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, even though its action comprises but four days. It is significant in his development for that reason, and still more so for the evidence it affords that in this book—whether temporarily or permanently remains to be seen—Hemingway has shaken off the mood of negation in which all his previous work had been done.

Of that aspect of the book I shall have more to say in my final chapter.

Whatever the shortcomings of Hemingway, it can truthfully be said of him that he worked with passionate integrity as an artist; that he subjected himself to a discipline which has been rare in contemporary writing. He was determined to transfer experience to the printed page as directly, in as unadulterated form, as language could effect, and within the limitations which his sensibility and his conscious purpose imposed, he was at times extraordinarily successful. But aside from the vitalizing effect which his style has had upon the craft of prose narrative (and there, too, the effects of his influence upon younger men was as often as not depressing to observe), one cannot say that the Hemingway influence as a whole was a salutary one for American creative writing. He has contributed nothing to the interpretation of American life; apart from the early short stories and the superficial social background of *To Have and Have Not*, he has ignored the American scene. The "hard-boiled" tradition which he established brought nothing to the illumination of life anywhere, for it excluded too much. Even the more gifted of the writers who derived from him, like John O'Hara, trickled away into sterility; those of them who took elements from his work calculated to have a purely sensational appeal produced the synthetic shockers of a James M. Cain. The attitude itself was sterile, for it was unavoidably self-conscious. It made necessary the maintenance of a pose, and that is fatal to any writing which would keep its hold either upon the minds or hearts of men. We can respect, admire, and even envy, detachment; we respond to a genuine sympathy; but we recoil in the end, however much we may at first be fascinated, from an affectation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FACT AND THE VISION

I

YET there were writers who held their balance during the 'Twenties and the 'Thirties: writers who refused to work in the narrow mould of naturalism; who did not sit in absorbed contemplation of their navels; who, if they were critics of the American scene, at the same time strove to retain a vision of the American purpose. There were writers who did not flinch from the observation and recording of human folly, stupidity and viciousness, but who could still hold to a belief in the indestructible dignity of the human spirit, in the resolution and hope by which it has endured. And has not every morning's newspaper for the past five years brought us confirmation of their faith? If war has never been waged on a more brutal and cynical level, neither has man ever met its tests more staunchly. He has never killed more savagely or in more contemptible ways, and he has never faced a common peril with a finer abnegation of self. This war may not have produced a single great poem, but greatness of spirit it has produced abundantly, in a thousand stories of unselfish courage and unshatterable will. The writer who tells you that man is a maggot crawling about on a dung-heap is either a fool or a liar. Let him read the retort to his self-pity in the boats that blackened the Channel lanes to Dunkirk; in the rafts on the wide and lonely Pacific; in the bomb shelters of London and the rubble of Stalingrad. In the presence of such spirit as that of the submarine commander who quietly ordered, "Take her down!" before the seas washed over him, he should be silent and ashamed. These are not new heights of the human spirit; others like them shine down through all the dim past of recorded time. Man

reached them when he felt himself enthroned at the centre of the universe, the special darling of a just and righteous God, and he reaches them now, when he has been told he must think of himself as a minute particle of accidental life, temporarily lodged on an inconsequential and doomed satellite of a minor and dying sun. He will reach them while he continues to draw the breath of life.

✓ I do not subscribe to the belief that it is the business of creative literature either to preach or to teach, for didacticism lays upon art a heavy and throttling hand. Its business is to transmit human experience in such a way as to bring the conviction of truth, but if in doing this it also achieves beauty of form, we are the more rewarded. If literature were not capable of being art, the anti-moralists would not have a leg to stand on. For if literature is not used to strengthen and advance the human spirit or to give delight (which can accomplish much the same thing), it becomes a denial of life and an invitation to death. De Quincey somewhere remarks that the various forms of creative literature "all alike restore to man's mind the ideals of justice, of hope, of truth, of mercy, of retribution, which else (left to the support of daily life in its realities) would languish for want of sufficient illustration." He goes on to say that, were it not for this animating force of literature, "these ideals would often remain amongst us as mere notional forms; whereas, by the creative forces of man put forth in literature they gain a vernal life of restoration and germinate into vital activities. The commonest novel, by moving *in alliance* with human fears and hopes, with human instincts of wrong and right, sustains and quickens those affections." But literature must accomplish this effect by indirection; in other words, by providing for the reader a wider or deeper view of life than he may himself command. I italicized the words "*in alliance*," because therein, I think, lies the heart of De Quincey's contention. The writer must be in alliance with life—that is, accepting both its good and its evil, if his work is to have any validity.

It is noteworthy, perhaps, that in the period when the dominant mood among our men writers was one of bitterness and negation,

an affirmative tone was more often heard in the work of the women. They were more likely to find their themes in the triumph of the individual over circumstance than in his frustration and defeat. And I am not thinking now of the writers of comforting romances for whom all difficulties are resolved in the last chapter's embrace, but of serious and conscientious artists like Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, and Pearl Buck. Is it that women are more schooled in the commonplace practice of faith and fortitude, whereas men are more generally tested only in the hours of exceptional crisis? Whatever the reason, they have held more consistently to the literature of courage.

Certainly no writer in contemporary fiction, man or woman, has less of Pollyanna in her temperament than Ellen Glasgow. A publisher with an eye on the market once asked her why she didn't write an optimistic novel about the West. Because, she explained, if there was anything she knew less about than the West, it was optimism. No American writer of our time has employed a more relentless irony, a more unsparing wit; but at the heart of all she has written there has burned a steady flame of courage. All her mature work revolves about one central conviction: that the only triumph over life lies in the refusal to accept defeat. On the title-page of *Vein of Iron* appeared two lines from Wordsworth's "Prelude":

Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.

They sum up, in a very few words, her essential attitude towards human experience. Unless we live with "effort, expectation, and desire," we are mocked by life; we are betrayed by it unless we keep the sense of "something evermore about to be."

Praise of Miss Glasgow's wit, her pervasive humour (which she only once deliberately excluded, in *Barren Ground*), her flashes of epigrammatic wisdom, and her command of a truly notable English style, have long since become a commonplace, and I shall

not elaborate upon them here. So, too, has there been a persistent emphasis upon her function as a social historian of her native Virginia, and upon her boldness in approaching, in a mood of inquiring realism, material which had too long been bathed in nostalgic sentiment. These last are contributions for which writers are remembered and tagged by literary historians, but it is not for such reasons that their books continue to be read by an admiring posterity. Ellen Glasgow wisely chose to write of the world she knew, an aristocratic and a yeoman society in the throes of a painful transition; and being more clear-sighted, of a tougher and sharper mental fibre than was common among those of whom she wrote, she saw her Southern ladies and gentlemen living in a maze of illusions, divorced from the world of actuality. It was an experience calculated to quicken within her the tragic sense of life, to make her find relief in the play of irony, and refuge in courage, "the only lasting virtue." What was alien to her experience she judiciously omitted from her social panorama, so that no more than Jane Austen, keeping within the limits of the life she knew, are her books to be measured by a sociological yardstick. We read Jane Austen, not for knowledge of the social structure of early nineteenth-century England, but for her quick and deep awareness in human relations. There, too, and in the pleasure we derive from her attention to form, are the abiding qualities of Ellen Glasgow. Like Henry James and Edith Wharton before her, she has been as much concerned with the architecture of her novels as with their fidelity to life. Thus, in *Barren Ground*, where she was intent upon establishing and maintaining a tragic mood, she rigidly excluded the humour which was natural to her as a person, lest she weaken the unified effect for which she was working. That book and *The Sheltered Life* are technically her purest achievements; the one for its unbroken unity, the other for its skilful counterpoint. She herself has best described the strongly effective technique which she used in *The Sheltered Life*, the book that, to my mind, not only marks the peak of her achievement as a conscious artist, but also combines in the fullest

measure all her best qualities as a novelist. In Jenny Blair Archbald and her grandfather, the General, "Age and youth look on the same scenes, the same persons, the same events and occasions, the same tragedy in the end. Between these conflicting points of view the story flows on, as a stream flows in a narrow valley. Nothing happens that is not seen, on one side, through the steady gaze of the old man seeing life as it is, and, on the other side, by the young girl seeing life as she would wish it to be." Out of this method emerges a deeply moving portrayal of eager anticipation of life on the part of youth, and philosophic acceptance of its reality on the part of age. It is the unobtrusive art of that counterpoint, the perfect balance of the two viewpoints, balanced as they are in life itself, and animated by the two completely credible human beings who represent them, which secure for *The Sheltered Life* its echoing truth. Therein lies its claim on posterity, and not the fact that it is, in the words of one critic, "a haunting study in social decomposition." It is that only indirectly, by virtue of Miss Glasgow's material. A reporter can write a haunting study of social decomposition; of a novelist we may reasonably expect more.

Barren Ground, for all its technical excellence, derives its strength as much from its emotional intensity. It is, I should say, the most deeply felt of all Miss Glasgow's novels. I have emphasized the vein of iron which lies at the core of her work, her insistence that the only triumph over life is in the refusal to admit defeat. Miss Glasgow is too wise a woman to pretend that the triumph is always absolute; and Dorinda, in *Barren Ground*, is, at the end, frustrated at the centre of a woman's being; her triumph is a triumph of the second-best. She has learned to live without joy. Courage is a virtue with which Miss Glasgow has more consistently endowed her women than her men, beginning with Betty Ambler of *The Battleground*, and Virginia, in the novel of that name, who was "capable of dying for an idea, but not of conceiving one." Even Mrs. Birdsong, in *The Sheltered Life*, slipping through life without looking it in the face, has a muted sort of courage, which

flares forth only in her last and tragic act. And yet, with few exceptions, her women are the realists; her men, speaking to some degree in a figurative sense, are the poets and philosophers. Of her old men, the most memorable of whom is General Archbald, it may be said that they are, with those of John Galsworthy, the most convincingly portrayed in recent fiction.

2

Like Miss Glasgow, Willa Cather has pursued the art of fiction with a single-minded devotion, and with as much interest in her method as in her material. She has written always on a note of high seriousness. I do not suppose there is a page in all of Miss Cather's writing to cause a flicker of amusement; and yet, such is the delicacy of her perceptions, the power of her imaginative sympathy, and the easy flow and crystal clarity of her prose, that she is never leaden. Her metal is silver, cool, and beautifully wrought.

It was the accident of her removal, while still a child, from the Virginia farm on which she was born, to the wide and rolling plains of Nebraska, just then opening to settlement, that struck fire from her receptive mind, implanting impressions so vivid and so deeply felt that they were to provide the material for the major part of her creative work. She grew up among the immigrant pioneers of Hamlin Garland's *Middle Border*, and she was to write about their lives with a realism that is lit with tenderness and understanding. Sympathy rather than irony is the informing spirit of her work, and when she had exhausted the material which she drew from her youth, she found play for it in the heroic story of the Catholic Church in the South-West and in Canada. From this feeling of sympathy came the initial impulse to write. "Few of our neighbours," she once remarked in an interview, "were Americans—most of them were Danes, Swedes, Norwegians and Bohemians. I grew fond of some of these immigrants—particularly the old women, who used to tell me of their home

country. I used to think them underrated, and wanted to explain them to their neighbours." Years afterwards she was to feel that she had never found any intellectual excitement more intense than her response to their talk. "Their stories," she wrote, "used to go round and round in my head at night."

No contemporary novelist has suffered more solemn nonsense at the hands of those critics who would reduce literature to a department of sociology. Unable to deny the purity and quiet illumination of her art, they mournfully shake their heads over her "retreat" into the security of the Catholic tradition, and reproach her with having lost contact with the world in which she lives. Should we not ask of an artist, not to what world he goes, but what he brings back from it? To be sure, he is more likely to bring back something of value if his material is intimately known and deeply felt—and that is why regional and national roots are helpful—but are we to protest when he compensates for the lack of direct experience by the power of sympathetic understanding? So conscious are we of our disordered world, that we have, in our literary criticism, for ever been calling upon writers to deal with matters which are not their primary concern, to solve problems which it is not their business to solve. The novel had the aesthetic misfortune to prove itself an effective instrument of social reform; must we therefore demand of all novels that they be bent to that purpose?

Miss Cather once wrote a brief essay on the art of fiction which she called "The Novel *Démeublé*." It was an artist's protest against the debasement of realistic technique by cluttering the novel with furniture, with unnecessary objects and a plethora of sensory reactions. Miss Cather's whole point was that art demands the selection of *significant* material, and she made it clear by a comparison of the methods of Balzac and Tolstoy. Of Balzac's passion to reproduce on paper the physical substance of the city of Paris, and all the mechanism of its life, she remarks: "In exactly so far as he succeeded in pouring out on his pages that mass of brick and mortar and furniture and proceedings in bankruptcy, in exactly

so far he defeated his end. The things by which he still lives, the types of greed and avarice and ambition and vanity and lost innocence of heart which he created—are as vital to-day as they were then. But their material surroundings upon which he expended such labour and pains . . . the eye glides over them." In Tolstoy, who had an equally consuming interest in material things, there was "this determining difference: the clothes, the dishes, the haunting interiors of those old Moscow houses, are always so much a part of the emotions of the people that they are perfectly synthesized; they seem to exist, not so much in the author's mind, as in the emotional penumbra of the characters themselves. When it is fused like this, literalness ceases to be literalness—it is merely part of the experience." But what becomes of this purely artistic principle in the mind of a critic who must measure a writer merely in terms of social forces? It becomes, if you please, simply a rejection of modern industrial culture! It serves him as one more proof of Miss Cather's secession from her world.

I think it is time to put an end to this preposterous humbug which maintains that a writer can speak to his own age only when he speaks in terms of its immediate and temporary difficulties. I believe that the least important thing about a creative writer's work is his choice of material; what matters is the degree of truth, of art, and of illumination which he can bring to it. The basic problems of life are repetitive and eternal; they are the individual's relation to himself, to his fellows, and to God. They were essentially the same when slaves toiled to build the Pyramids, or when the tumbrils clattered through the streets of Paris, as they are to-day in a Pittsburgh steel mill or a New York night club. Thomas Mann has just completed a fictional re-creation, in five volumes, of the life of Joseph of Egypt, and what he has written speaks, in its implications, more directly to his time than nine-tenths of the novels with a contemporary setting which have been published in the twentieth century. The story of Joseph is the story of how one man dealt with all three of life's major problems, and because Thomas Mann brought to his work creative imagina-

tion and wisdom, the Joseph novels, which owe nothing to the facts of human life at this particular moment of the world's history, have nevertheless a direct bearing upon them. Most historical novels are unimportant and yield nothing beyond entertainment, not because they deal with the past, but because they merely exchange the furniture of one age for that of another. When they penetrate beyond the externals of living, when they deal creatively with the spirit of man, with its tests and triumphs, its defeats and aspirations, its interminable march towards self-realization, they speak to us here and now. So speaks Thomas Mann in the story of Joseph; so spoke Elizabeth Madox Roberts in that finest of all American historical novels, *The Great Meadow*, and so, to a lesser degree, spoke Willa Cather, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. All are books of timeless vitality and truth.

What nonsense, then, and what presumption, to berate Miss Cather because in that book, and in *Shadows on the Rock*, she passed, in time, beyond the range of her own life experience. She had made rich use, in *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, and *The Song of the Lark*, of the impressions of her youth; later, she came to know the South-West, a land that must fire any imaginative mind, and the longer she stayed there, so she tells us, the more she felt that the story of the Catholic Church in that region was the most interesting of all its stories, which it is. Then, too, she had wanted all her life "to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment"—and the material seemed to her perfect for the purpose. These are the motives from which an artist creates, from insistent inner pressures which will not be denied—not because she had watched, with painful regret, the inevitable changes that come to the ways of life that we know and love. She could record those, too, in *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House*. But life goes on, a flowing and indivisible stream; and now, or a little while since, or long ago, one catches the gleam of the values which give it meaning, and, if one is an artist, tries to transfix the shining moment. Do you remember, in *The Song of the Lark*, the sudden revelation that came to Thea Kronberg?

One morning, as she was standing upright in the pool, splashing water between her shoulder-blades with a big sponge, something flashed through her mind that made her draw herself up and stand still until the water had quite dried upon her flushed skin. The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women had held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested motion. In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals.

Miss Cather's work, no less than Miss Glasgow's, belongs in the literature of courage. In spite of her cool tones there is, at the heart of all her writing, a flaming affirmation. The sin against life is the failure, she implies over and over again, to realize one's potentialities. Whether it is Antonia, realizing hers with the unconscious, steady direction of a simple, deeply rooted nature, or Thea Kronberg, with the conscious and inflexible purpose of the artist, or Marian Forrester, holding fiercely to her love of living even when she takes the shoddy for the real, or even Lucy Gayheart, who lost to death only because "When she caught fire, she went like an arrow, towards whatever end," the will of her people is towards life. They are, all of them, warriors against circumstance.

3

There are two other women whose work has been notably upon the side of life. Pearl Buck brought to hers the deeply absorbed attitude towards human experience of a race far removed from her own and far more deeply schooled in the vicissitudes of human fate. Living in China through her most impressionable years, and returning again for the period of her early maturity, she took for her own the Chinese realistic but undaunted accept-

ance of the human lot. She saw life as the Chinese themselves see it, ceaselessly ending and renewing, swinging for ever between pain and joy. So deeply had she identified herself with the people of her adoption, that when she returned to make her life in the country of her birth and sought to find new material here, reality eluded her. But in *The Good Earth* especially, and in her other stories of China, she caught and translated into universal terms immemorial human attitudes. She conveyed, with convincing emotion and recognizable truth, that most elusive yet most important sense that the novelist can convey—the sense of the continuity of human experience. More effectively, perhaps, than any other writer, she made American readers aware, in the lives of a completely alien people, of universal human bonds. And aside from its value as art and its validity as a scene in the vast human spectacle, *The Good Earth* was seed well sown for the times upon which we are now entering, and their demands upon us for a more inclusive and a more richly sympathetic vision of the world in which we live.

When I come to Elizabeth Madox Roberts, I speak of a writer whose importance has, I believe, not yet been fully realized. It is my own conviction that she brought more enrichment to the American novel than any man or woman who has come to the writing of fiction in the last quarter of a century. When she died, in her late fifties, she had published six novels, two volumes of short stories, and a small body of poetry. Two of the novels, certainly, and possibly three, stand with the best in the history of American fiction. *The Great Meadow*, as I have already remarked, seems to me the topmost achievement in our historical fiction; *The Time of Man* I regard as unsurpassed in our regional literature, both in fidelity to its material and in its achievement of universal values. *My Heart and My Flesh*, in dealing with the intensity which emotional experience can have, comes closer to the probing power of Dostoevsky than any other novel that I know, written by an American. These are large claims, but I believe that time will confirm them.

In this Kentuckian, born of the pioneer strain that struggled through Cumberland Gap into the canebrakes of Kentucky, we had another champion of the human spirit. She, too, knew that life is from within, and held it in her mind as an indivisible stream, for ever renewing itself at the source. She knew that "One man is greater than a million blades of grass, although flesh is but grass and that is true enough. Man asserted himself above the grass and enslaved the herbs of the ground."

The Time of Man, published in 1926, came like a stray from another world into the fiction of its period. That, too, was the year of *The Sun Also Rises*, but I venture to predict for Miss Roberts's book the longer life. It is a story of life among the tenant farmers of Kentucky, basically realistic in its treatment, forgetting nothing of the material meagreness of their lives, migrants whose hopes are for ever dashed and for ever renewed. It is, in its way, an epic in folk terms of the human journey, of mankind's never-ending hope for some fairer land, some more desirable world. Human aspiration speaks in Ellen Chesser, child of a tenant farmer, whom we watch repeat the pattern of her parents' lives, and who sees her own hopes and yearnings reborn again in her own children, asking, as the book ends, the same questions of life which she herself had asked as a child.

Outwardly, the theme of *The Great Meadow* is the opening up of Kentucky by the pioneers who followed in the path of Daniel Boone. Inwardly, it is the power of mind and will over the material world. Always, in the background, moves the figure of Daniel Boone, imposing himself on the wilderness, "preparing it for civil men." This inner theme sounds a resonant overtone throughout the story, reaching a powerful crescendo in the final scene, in which Berk Jarvis returns from several years' captivity among the Indians, to find his wife, Diony, believing him dead, married to another man. It was not an uncommon situation in the exigencies of pioneer life, but Miss Roberts brings to the scene uncommon power. By frontier custom, it is for Diony to choose between the two men, and her choice is made as Berk Jarvis tells

his story. As Berk separated "the thinking part of a man from the part the Ojibways would have put in their kettle," as he resolved, facing death, that "where'er I go I take my strong part with me," she saw, with a clarity which had never come to her before, the indestructibility and the unconquerable strength of the spirit.

I know of no American writer in whose work one can find more convincing demonstrations of the means by which fiction can transcend the effect of a merely literal realism, to the end that it not only reflects life but illuminates it as well. There is, of course, a comparable distinction to be made in painting. Here is a landscape, let us say, in which the artist has recorded his impressions at the hour of approaching dusk. His picture is well composed, he has a good sense of colour, but his handling of the subject is purely literal. No feeling, no spirit, informs his picture. And here is another landscape, less literal in treatment, but from it emanates the hushed peace of the place and hour. It is more difficult, I think, to say how such an effect is achieved on canvas than how it is done in the pages of a book. But what has happened in both cases is identical; it is, in a broad sense, the infusion of poetry.

When I speak of the infusion of poetry into fiction I am not thinking of what is commonly referred to as the "poetic novel." I am thinking of something that goes deeper than a mere overlay of phrasing and manner. What I have in mind is that baring flash by which the novelist, dealing with a given situation, is able to transcend the immediate concerns of his characters, and to give to their speech, their thoughts or their actions, a significance that throws a shaft of light on human behaviour, so that what his people say or do has an interest and meaning for us beyond his depiction of their particular experience. His handling of the situation assumes a universal value.

It is this which Miss Roberts accomplishes in the closing scene of *The Great Meadow*, and it is even more fully apparent in those pages of *The Time of Man* in which Jonas Prather, Ellen Chesser's lover, confesses his visits to the house of Jule Nestor, and expresses

his fear that he may be the father of her baby, born a few days before. Jonas has been in an agony of self-abasement; Ellen is hurt, bewildered, torn between pity for his disgust with himself and the painful sense of something of Jonas that was lost to her. After he had told her and they had stopped speaking:

She arose from the step and went down to the path where she stood until he came to stand beside her. She asked him if he would like to go with her to feed the great white turkeys, for they were a sight to see, like great birds, all their feathers in a flutter. At the pens he kept beside her, even following her closely when she went to the barn on some errand. There was a moment when he leaned over the drinking pans to pour the water out, when she hated his pain and his shame, and her hate spread to his limbs and his back, his bent head and reaching hands. She talked about the white turkeys and the price they would bring Miss Tod, or she had him lift one to guess its weight. Or standing at the bars beside the milking lot, when he came forward down the calf pen, when the turkeys were housed in the barn and the hush of their feathers was settling over the dusk, she gathered Jonas with her eyes and pitied him, and pitied herself and all men and women, and took his hand and walked back across the pasture.

This scene, of which I have quoted only the conclusion, is sharply realistic, pictorially vivid, but its truth does not stop there, with its verisimilitude, as it would in the hands of a lesser craftsmen. If Miss Roberts had given us only the externals we would have known at the end only that Jonas was ashamed and Ellen hurt. But she went beyond the fact, so that in her hands the scene became much more than a character-revealing incident in the lives of this man and girl. We draw from it a poignant sense of the complex character of all human emotions, of the shifting borderline between love and hate, of that commonalty in which human beings exist, men and women together. What we are given is no longer merely a scene between a man and a girl; it is the human being in relation to life. It is, then, by such means

as these that the novelist is able to reach beyond the bare transcript of human experience, that he succeeds in passing from the particular to the universal. And so long as there are novelists who are able to do that, there is no danger that the art of fiction will come to a dead-end. It would not matter, even, if the sources of new material were exhausted, for poetry has been joined to fact, and what is poetry, in its deepest essence, but the familiar freshly perceived?

If Elizabeth Roberts helped to point the way for the novel out of the morass of naturalism, she was, too, an interesting experimenter in the matter of its form. A lover of symphonic music, she tried consciously, and with rewarding effect, to bring to her novels something of symphonic structure. At the time when E. M. Forster, in his *Aspects of the Novel*, was wondering whether it was not possible for a work of fiction to achieve an effect "comparable to the effect of the Fifth Symphony as a whole, where, when the orchestra stops, we hear something that has never actually been played," Miss Roberts was aiming at precisely this. The use of a recurrent and interwoven theme, the rise to a high emotional pitch, followed by closing chords of conflict finally resolved into peace and hope, is easily traceable in all her major work. Suggestive and stimulating as her technical innovations were, it is in the approach to life which she shared with the other writers of whom I have spoken in this chapter that I believe her work to have been most fruitful and significant. They are all writers in whom the fact and the vision are joined.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MAIN STREET AND THE DUST BOWL

I

OF the outstanding male novelists whose recognition came in the period between the wars, there were two whose work, in spite of its severely critical approach to American life, must be reckoned as positive in spirit. They were Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck. Unlike Anderson, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Wolfe, they did not entangle themselves in the problems of their own egos; they succeeded, to a far greater degree, in looking outside and beyond themselves. Unlike Dreiser, Dos Passos, Hemingway, and Farrell, they did not approach life with a naturalistic bias. Though there was a strong romantic vein in the temperaments of both, they were realists in practice, and though sentimentality sometimes marred their work, it was not their controlling frame of mind. Few, indeed, are the writers who have escaped its touch.

Elsewhere in this book I have remarked that the greatest writers have been lovers of mankind, lovers of life, and I was thinking primarily of the novelists. In that most candid of literary autobiographies, *The Summing Up*, Somerset Maugham confesses his belief that because of his restricted human sympathies it is impossible that his work should ever have "the intimacy, the broad human touch and the animal serenity which the greatest writers alone can give." It is not surprising, then, that Maugham's finest piece of creative work should have been that intensely autobiographical novel, *Of Human Bondage*, because, in what was basically a sincere and earnest effort at self-examination, he was less thwarted by the absence of those sympathies which he feels in himself. Nor, similarly, is it surprising that his success as

a playwright should have been achieved in the comedy of manners, which offers ample scope for wit and sharp observation, but is also detached and not dependent upon sympathy.

Certainly, whatever the shortcomings of Lewis and Steinbeck, lack of human sympathy is not one of them. Not only are they both passionate humanitarians; their liking for mankind is not a merely abstract love of humanity, but spills over, prodigally, into the particular. There is no acid in Lewis's satire, and Steinbeck enraged the narrow-minded because, in *The Moon is Down*, he could believe that a man might be a Nazi and yet be human.

There has been no sharper eye in literature than that of Sinclair Lewis. He has been beyond question, I think, the greatest photographer in our fiction, and that has been at once his limitation and his genius. It would be as unjust, for that reason, to deny him the name of artist as it would be in the case of Edward Steichen and his camera studies, but that his art is on a lower level than that practised, let us say, by Willa Cather, seems to me as evident as that no photograph, however skilled, can bring us what we find in an El Greco or a Rembrandt. E. M. Forster, years ago, made one of the most penetrating observations about Lewis's work that we have, when he wrote: "His commentary on society is constant, coherent, sincere; yet the reader's eye follows the author's eye rather than his voice, and when Main Street is quitted it is not its narrowness, but its existence that remains as a permanent possession." Reading Lewis, I think, is something like bringing back a set of pictures of the Grand Canyon; they recall for you the shapes and forms, but they cannot convey what you felt as you stood there.

It has been the critical convention, during recent years, to ascribe the falling off of Lewis's later work to his increasing self-identification with the points of view which he had so vigorously assailed in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. There is, I admit, some measure of truth in this interpretation. Fred Cornplow, in *The Prodigal Parents*, is assuredly permitted to symbolize his virtues in a way that Lewis did not allow to Babbitt. But Lewis had said

what he had to say about the stifling side of village life, and about the cant and humbug, the yearning for protective colouration he had observed in the run-of-the-mill American business man; he had said it, and he had made the country and the world listen." He knew as well as those who attacked him that there was a reverse side to the picture. Criticism levelled at the things we love is likely to be sharper, more penetrating, than that which is delivered from a more detached point of view, as we may observe in Mr. Marquand's Apleys and Pulhams, as well as in Lewis's Babbitts and Doc Kennicotts. Lewis loved Babbitt while he tweaked his nose, and he could as truthfully have written of him, in 1922, as he did of Fred Cornplow in 1938, "who in the world has ever been more important than Fred Cornplow? He has, at times, been too noisy or too prosy; he has now and then thought more of money than of virtue and music; but he has been the eternal doer; equally depended upon—and equally hated—by the savage mob and the insolent nobility . . . when he changes his mind, that crisis is weightier than Waterloo or Thermopylae."

Who is there to say it is not true? What is unfair to Lewis is the implication, in some of this criticism, that he has been guilty of moral backsliding, that he has turned tail upon himself. What could be more natural or more logical, when Lewis felt the fundamental values of American life to be threatened—the beliefs which permitted the George Babbitts, the Fred Cornplows, and the Doremus Jessups to be the absurd fellows that they sometimes were, and to be, at the same time, the world's best hope—than for him to say, in effect, "It was all in the family."

There are better reasons than these for the weakness of Lewis's recent novels. Satire, for one thing, unless firmly controlled, has a way of backfiring; and when, in that very ineffectual book, *The Prodigal Parents*, he dealt testily with the younger Cornplows, his picture ended by being unfair to the youngsters searching for ground beneath their feet, and sentimental towards the older generation. The issue between them was never clearly drawn and fairly balanced.

I submit that the continued reliance upon photography had more than a little to do with the decline. *Gideon Planish* was a cut above the books which had immediately preceded it because it gave a wider scope for Lewis's camera: a teeming segment of American life that he had never touched—the world of professional uplifting—made to his hand because of his unquenchable contempt for smugness and pretence. The subjects were new, and there was no need to trot out the old negatives.

Let me call again upon Mr. Forster, who wrote in *Abinger Harvest*, "So long as a writer has the freshness of youth in him he can work the snapshot method, but when it passes, he has nothing to fall back upon. It is here that he differs from the artist. [I have already qualified this distinction.] The artist has the power of retaining and digesting experiences which, years later, he may bring forth in a different form; to the end of life he is accompanied by a secret store."

As a matter of fact, it is in *Babbitt*, where the photography is at its freshest and best, and in *Dodsworth*, where the effects are already a little dulled by repetition, that Lewis succeeds in bringing to his work something more than photography. *Babbitt* remains, to date, his most fully realized character. He is not only seen from without, with all the impedimenta of his life (including the memorable bathroom of the opening chapter), more clearly than any of Lewis's people; he is also endowed with more of inner life than any man or woman Lewis has drawn. And in *Dodsworth*, where both Fran and *Dodsworth* himself have depth as well as outline, there is a more convincing and moving treatment of human relations than Lewis commonly achieved. I cannot share the general choice of *Arrowsmith* as Lewis's best novel, in spite of the appealing quality he contrived for Leora. The book moves jerkily, and *Arrowsmith*, although he is presented with unreserved admiration, is reflected rather than brought to life. *Arrowsmith's* work, rather than the man himself, holds the stage, whereas it is *Babbitt* of whom we are always most conscious, for all the sharp detail of his background.

It is true, as Alfred Kazin observes in *On Native Grounds*, that Lewis's men are boys at heart, that only his Europeans are granted maturity; but his instinct there was sure, and they are the more American for that. No writer of our time had spoken in accents more unmistakably native; none has reached out to grasp a wider sweep of contemporary American life. For none could we wish more fervently powers to supplement those which are his, and none will more surely be remembered for the use which he made of them. There is so much in Sinclair Lewis that is unconquerably young (a trait of which I shall have more to say in another chapter), unendingly so expectant, for ever and so touchingly naïve (this nowhere more evident than in his constant pursuit, in the women of his novels, of the "impossible she"), that we can never believe him finished, his last arrow spent. Whether or not he finds his way to add to the stature which he reached twenty years ago, we shall always know him, among all others, for our own. He helped us to see ourselves at a time when we needed to most, and he has never lost his faith that we could survive the blemishes in the picture.

2

Of Steinbeck, still in mid-career, still feeling his way, it is impossible now to say he is this, that, and no other. His descriptive power is much less dependent upon the camera than that of Lewis; he is an artist on a higher level. No opening chapter of a novel ever set the stage more vividly, or packed it more fully with the atmosphere of impending drama, than the first chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which the men, women, and children watch the dust storm sweeping over Oklahoma. Not only do you see and feel the dust; much more important, you are told:

Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust. The men were silent and they did not move often. And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men—to feel whether this time the men would break. The women studied

the men's faces secretly, for the corn could go, so long as something else remained. The children stood near by, drawing figures in the dust with bare toes, and the children sent exploring senses out to see whether the men and women would break. The children peeked at the faces of the men and women, and then drew careful lines in the dust with their toes. Horses came to the watering troughs and nuzzled the water to clear the surface dust. After a while the faces of the watching men lost their bemused perplexity and became hard and angry and resistant. Then the women knew that they were safe and that there was no break. Then they asked, What'll we do? And the men replied, I don't know. But it was all right. The women knew it was all right, and the watching children knew it was all right. Women and children knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole. The women went into the houses to their work, and the children began to play, but cautiously, at first. As the day went forward the sun became less red. It flared down on the dust-blanketed land. The men sat in the doorways of their houses; their hands were busy with sticks and little rocks. The men sat still—thinking—figuring.

This, in its quality, is the same kind of writing as in the scene I quoted from *The Time of Man*; it gives us the outer facts, sharply and precisely observed, but it gives us something more—the inner truth. It gets down to the bedrock of human personality. It is a quality that is missing in Sinclair Lewis, for all the brilliance of his surface recording. The fact that Steinbeck has it does much to make up for his occasional lapses into a stagy sentimentality. It is one of the marks of a writer who is sensitive to something more than merely visual impressions. When you find it cropping out in a first novel which exhibits other capacities as well, as in the case of John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano*, you know that you have a novelist worth watching. Thus, when Hersey describes how the women in the liberated town greet their returning men, there is the same flash of illumination, lighting up more than the scene itself, that Steinbeck throws into the opening pages of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The women who stood on the sidewalk in front of the Palazzo had lived in daily dread that their men might be hurt, or worse. Women who had argued with their men and been impatient with them when they had them securely forgot the arguments and thought only of the nice things, the being waked up in the middle of the night by a man crawling clumsily into bed, the loud laugh with the head thrown back, the smell of a certain smoke, the sound of a certain kind of wine clucking out of the bottle.

And so the women stood there on the sidewalk in front of the Palazzo with their hands at their throats or reaching vaguely for loose wisps of hair.

The men walking up the street saw the women standing there. They did not break into a run. Their happiness was terrifying; they walked slowly towards their women.

When the men had reached a place about five hundred yards from the women, the crowd of women started moving forwards slowly at first, the feet just shuffling on the sidewalk, then stepping forward as necks craned and eyes darted, then walking to be closer and finally running and shouting wordless sounds.

The men did not break into a run. The women ran towards the men. There was equal happiness on both sides, but it just happened that most of the men knew their women would be there, whereas some of the women were not sure that their men would be there. That was the difference. That is why the women ran.

Every writer in whom the current of human sympathy and understanding runs strong, as it runs in these passages, is prone to slip over at times into the sentimental, and Steinbeck's most serious offence in this respect was his *Of Mice and Men*. Aside from the artificiality induced by the fact that the story was conceived in terms of the play which was made from it, Steinbeck fails to engage our sympathy fully because the hulking Lennie is too moronic a creature to give reality and depth to the natural human craving for "a little piece of land." There is too much in Lennie that is twisted and subhuman for his emotion to strike a universal chord. It is not, as Mr. Kazin suggests, Steinbeck's simplicity of characterization that makes Lennie and George "into

furry little animals," for you can't make an omelet without eggs, and Lennie is a barely articulate animal, and George hardly more. So, too, it is equally absurd to find Lennie, as Maxwell Geismar does, ending "as a sort of Bunyan in the historic Pilgrim's Progress of modern economic life." He is just as meaningless as a symbol of humanity as he is empty of mentality and character. There is a strange attraction for Steinbeck in human personality reduced to the lowest possible terms, as there is for such horribly perverted emotions as those displayed by the girl in the story called "The Snake."

It is a baffling twist in a writer whose sense of human relations is as fundamentally sound and strong as Steinbeck's, best to be accounted for, perhaps, by the keen interest in biological processes which he has shown. The sadistic impulses, however, which occasionally control his writing are too frequent phenomena in the fiction, the movies, and the photography of our period, as well as in actual contemporary human behaviour, to be explainable solely in terms of the individual. They are part, no doubt, of a mass sickness which infects our world; when a pictorial magazine offers as a full-page feature the photograph of a grief-stricken widow arriving at the funeral services for her husband, the society which accepts it as a matter of course is not in a normal frame of mind.

Nevertheless, I shall be surprised if Steinbeck does not move on to do even stronger work than *The Grapes of Wrath*, overweighted as it sometimes was by the vehemence of his anger. *The Pastures of Heaven*, *Tortilla Flat*, and *In Dubious Battle* (the most humanely conceived labour novel that we have yet had) are all encouraging evidence that Steinbeck is a writer who can deal vitally with the material that life spreads before him. Nobody writing to-day has a finer descriptive power, not even Hemingway; he has both curiosity and affection in his approach to human conduct, and a strong narrative sense. I see no reason why his handling of character should not arrive at greater variety and depth, and I cannot share the contemptuous attitude of those

critics who have dismissed Ma Joad as a hokum-daubed portrait of the American Mom. Steinbeck does not present her as the sentimentalized mother; he sees her as something much more real than that. He makes her symbolic of the strength of the family as a human unit, and she has a rude but genuine wisdom of life.

3

Both Steinbeck and Lewis have been among the few serious novelists who have helped to keep alive in us, during this last quarter-century, the belief that Americans are a humorous people. And, as a matter of fact, humour has been anything but a constant quantity throughout the history of American fiction—much less so than in the English novel, from the eighteenth century down. Humorists we have always had, but for the most part they have chosen to work in other forms. They have, with few exceptions, been either versifiers, columnists, or essayists, and when you think of humour as a quality in American writing to-day, you think first of people like James Thurber, Ogden Nash, and E. B. White.

American humour begins properly, I suppose, with Washington Irving, but Irving was not a novelist. There is no humour in the tales of Cooper, nor in those of Poe. Hawthorne is utterly humourless: in Melville there is but little. Henry James is sometimes ponderously or tenuously facetious; his humour is never robust and certainly not pervasive. Edith Wharton's was the indirect and chilly humour of irony. Howells, and, of course, Mark Twain, were the exceptions among the elder writers.

The early naturalists—Harold Frederic, Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser—were grimly intent upon their purpose of winning new liberties for American fiction, but these liberties did not include the invitation to laugh. And in the period immediately following their onslaught, amid the welter of problem novels and historical

romances, we found our fun with George Ade's *Fables in Slang* and Finley Peter Dunne's Mr. Dooley.

As we approach the contemporary scene we find our fiction still on the sombre side. There is no humour whatever in Sherwood Anderson, Faulkner, or Dos Passos; barely a trace in Hemingway. In the novels of Thomas Wolfe, we are told that people laugh raucously, but we do not laugh with them; there is not a chuckle in all of James T. Farrell. Scott Fitzgerald wrote with fantasy, but not with humour. One may go through Willa Cather from end to end, as I have already observed, without a smile. Ordinarily, you must descend to the level of the mystery story writers and the light fictioneers before you find some admission of the fact that life has its lighter moments. In the tons of fiction dealing with the American past which we have had during the last fifteen years, the humour might be assayed as a pound to the ton.

It is noteworthy, perhaps, that when E. B. White compiled his *Sub-Treasury of American Humour*, he found it possible to include only one extract from an American novel, and that was the first chapter of *Babbitt*. There was Ring Lardner, of course, but he never ventured beyond the short story, and there was Cabell, if you care for Cabell's humour. There has been Booth Tarkington, in whose case we have had to let the humour make up for his deficiencies in other respects, and Irvin Cobb, again a short-story writer, and Harry Leon Wilson, who never tried to be anything but funny, and assuredly was. (Long live *Bunker Bean* and *Ruggles of Red Gap*!) Elizabeth Madox Roberts had her lighter moods, but they were a trifle strained and bordered on the quaint. Ellen Glasgow has been one of our few novelists to possess both wit and humour; John Marquand is another. One of the reasons why I look forward to the future work of John Hersey is that there have been few more delightful pages in recent fiction than those in *A Bell for Adano* in which we watch Lojacono painting the boats, or the townsmen of Adano criticizing the major's portrait, or the major slyly bending the young navy lieutenant to his will.

There was, too, a lusty humour in Jesse Stuart's *Taps for Private Tussie*.

In spite of the fact that for some years past the novel in America has had more vitality than in any other country, one cannot deny that its humour has been scanty. Perhaps one reason for the prevailing sobriety of American fiction has been the fact that so many of our better novelists have been angry at something; if not angry at their environment or the social and economic pattern in general, then angry or at odds with themselves, like Thomas Wolfe.

Our novels, in common with our plays, have not been lacking in wit; a man can be witty and still be intolerant and without a firm stance in life; humour penetrates and pervades his work only when he has learned to look on the frauds and villainies of this world with a tolerant eye, only when he has won for himself some sort of stable vantage point from which to survey the antics of his fellow creatures.

I once discussed with André Maurois the ascendancy of wit over humour in recent American writing, and he remarked that in France wit had thrived especially in the atmosphere of court society—within a group whose interests and outlook were identical. What happened at the French court happens in any social group of highly charged, sharply intelligent people who establish a kind of intellectual currency that is peculiarly theirs. Wit feeds on wit; a constant interchange between those who are capable of it is necessary in order for it to flourish. If we conclude that wits are seldom hermits, a good case can be made, I suspect, for the reverse of that truth. Humour, you might almost say, thrives on solitude; at least, solitude is no hindrance to its development. You may say that American humour of the homespun sort flourished round the cracker barrel, and that is true. But it flourished not because of the cracker barrel, as wit in France flourished because of the court. What gave it fertile ground was the distinct individualities of the men around the cracker barrel. The men at court might be as similar as peas in a pod. That would

not matter, for the sort of wit current at one particular time and place is all of a kind, whereas humour demands its individual basis, its private roots. Until a man is able to think for himself, to form opinions that are not dependent upon the group attitudes of his time and place, he is incapable of humour. And it seems to me fair to assume that as American writers regain the intellectual independence that has been lacking among them during recent decades, we shall see a greater infusion of humour in American writing.

CHAPTER NINE

THE SONGS FOR A PEOPLE

I

POETRY, in the years between the wars, won back for a brief time the great audience it had lost with the decline of the Victorians. The two decades preceding the outbreak of World War I, both in England and America, saw poetry sink to a low level both in performance and in popular estimation. Vitality had left it, particularly in the United States. Overseas there were at least two major voices: Hardy and Yeats; America had none—the last had been Whitman. American poetry was filled with echoes and, with few exceptions, chained to prettiness. The only poet of the period who might have reached a major stature, William Vaughan Moody, was cut off by his untimely death. Edwin Arlington Robinson had begun to write, but he was not to achieve recognition until the revival in poetry came, immediately before the war. The upswing was practically simultaneous in England and America. The publication of John Masefield's *The Everlasting Mercy*, in 1911, had much the same effect as when, a century before, Wordsworth and Coleridge issued their *Lyrical Ballads*. Once more, poetry was exciting; once more, it reached out for a wider audience. Each time it had simplified its language, thrown off the stereotypes of poetic convention, found its subjects in direct and common experience, and expressed itself in the words of ordinary usage.

In America, the surge of vitalized creation and renewed public interest swept on like a tidal wave. It began with the founding, in 1912, of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, in Chicago. The four years which followed were truly remarkable. They saw the publication, in rapid succession, of Vachel Lindsay's

General William Booth Enters into Heaven and *The Congo and Other Poems*; James Oppenheim's *Song for the New Age*; the first anthology of the Imagists; Amy Lowell's *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*; Robert Frost's first volume, *North of Boston*, which had already appeared in England; the *Spoon River Anthology* of Edgar Lee Masters; John Gould Fletcher's *Irradiations*; Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems*; and Robinson's *The Man Against the Sky*. There had never been a comparable outpouring of fresh and vigorous poetry in the history of the United States. Once again poetry was being bought and read on a scale to which only the novelist might aspire. As John Butler Yeats expressed it, "the fiddles were tuning up all over America."

But the renaissance, unfortunately, was to be short-lived. The audience which had been won for it by Masfield overseas, and by Lindsay, Masters, Sandburg, Frost, and Robinson at home, was soon to be dissipated. Poetry was to take refuge in a succession of little magazines and to become the private province of the *cognoscenti*. Only a few poets of outstanding worth, who did not make obeisance to the strange gods which presently appeared on the literary horizon, continued to hold their audiences; Sandburg and Robinson and Frost, later joined by Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elinor Wylie, and Stephen Vincent Benét, were heard beyond the limited circle of those who followed the extremists to the bitter end.

It is not my intention to consider in detail the poetry that followed that brief renaissance. One by one, those who had led the revival died or fell silent, or, like Masters, failed to recover the first rapture. Of them all, only one among those still living has steadily deepened and enriched his art, and that is Robert Frost. There are writing in America to-day poets by the score who will be remembered in the anthologies, but I venture the guess that among all those of established reputation, he is the only one to whose collected work readers will turn generations hence for refreshment and delight. Since Whitman, he is the first of American poets who will indubitably belong to the world, and

beyond any question, I think, the greatest living American writer. His life as an artist, in its resolute integrity, its steady ripening and unshakable balance, has been one of the few reassuring and inspiring spectacles in the recent literary history of the United States. No poet or critic, of whatever school, can question or minimize the magnitude, the force and beauty of Frost's achievement. Not only did he make poetry of conversation as no poet before him had ever done; he shattered the tradition that lyric poetry is the privileged province of youth; Frost, in his sixties, has written lyrics of a fuller beauty, mellowed by the wisdom he has won for himself, than in any of his earlier years. In the preface he wrote for his *Collected Poems*, in 1939, he said that a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. . . . It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion." That "momentary stay against confusion" Frost has given us in greater measure than any American writer of his time. No poet or novelist among us has so profound a sense of the American spirit, and I can think of no living American in whom the country can take fuller satisfaction and pride.

The cynicism of the post-war mood, the distrust of the emotions, and the excessive rationalizing that were part of it, played the very devil with poetry. Just when it had re-established contact with a larger body of readers, it swerved off into secret by-paths and petered out in a welter of cerebral gymnastics. When it was not querulous or perverse, it was merely emotionally dead. Poet after poet devised an individual and private speech, and defied anyone else to understand him. And naturally, since people tire quickly of hearing a man talk only to himself, poetry lost rapidly the readers it had gained.

I do not mean to suggest that these recent years, in which poetry has turned so far inward and striven so hard for a new idiom, were

completely lost. Some valuable experimentation was done; the range of subject-matter was widened; sentimentality got short shrift, and there was a mental tightening up, a greater concision. But too many poets forgot that poetry has its roots in emotion, and that, in their efforts to create a closer-woven language for poetry, they were in danger of making (and, indeed, frequently did) a word fabric just as artificial in its way as the stale conventions into which poetry had fallen through the belief that only certain words and phrases were "poetic." Sometimes they have sounded as if they were trying to write "cablese," that curiously telescoped and inverted English which the foreign correspondent uses in the effort to cut down the cost of cable tolls, with the result that we get such lines (to select a relatively mild example) as:

While lights flash double meanings, dot and dash
Their cipher message, code whose key is love,
My mathematic dazzle dives like crash
Landing plane, where pilot spins, perilous of
Self-satisfaction, through no triple point
Approved to aerodrome happy_slant of wings.

2

Chiefly our poets have been at fault during these recent years because they have so often offered us as poetry what was simply bad prose. Obviously, what we want from poetry is something that prose cannot give; otherwise there is no point in writing it. A. E. Housman was near the truth when he said that poetry, at least so far as he was concerned, is felt in the pit of the stomach. It has an intensity which prose can seldom muster. Hans Zinsser, in *As I Remember Him*, knew what he was talking about when he wrote that

a poem means nothing to me unless it can carry me away with the gentle or passionate pace of its emotion, over obstacles of reality into meadows and coverts of illusion. Nor is it the material that

matters—whether it be the odd stirrings of nature and love, of war, or whether it deals with the tragedies and complexities of human fate. The sole criterion for me is whether it can sweep me with it into emotion or illusion of beauty, terror, tranquillity, or even (Herder to the contrary) disgust—as in Baudelaire—so long as it arouses fundamental feelings or reflections which, encountered without the poet, might have passed half realized, like a tongue of flame or a flying leaf. For the poet arrests emotions at their points of greatest supportable heat, just short of the melting point as it were, and can hold in that perfect state, permanent in his words and metres, those feelings and comprehensions which pass too quickly to be held through the minds of ordinary men.

It would be possible, of course, to quarrel with Dr. Zinsser's assertion that "the poet arrests emotions at their point of greatest supportable heat," just as it is possible to quarrel with Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity." There never has been a completely satisfactory definition of poetry; perhaps there never will be. Wordsworth's definition very likely held for him; one doubts if it did for Burns or Shelley, Keats or Byron. One doubts even if it did for Donne. Wordsworth no doubt remembered in tranquillity his wandering "lonely as a cloud" and what he felt when he saw the dancing daffodils, but it is more than likely that Burns wrote his incomparable love poems out of an immediate urgency.

Whether a poem is written at the height of emotion or at a time when the emotion is remembered surely does not matter. An equally good poem may result from either process. What does matter, and matters very much, is that the emotion should have been genuine and strong, and that it be communicated to the reader. These are fundamental, and no lyric poetry, certainly, that is worth a second glance was ever written without them. Eighteenth-century poetry, of course, was created by a purely rational process, and almost the only English poet of the period who rose above the purely intellectual pleasure which it gave was Blake.

A poem written merely to prove that the contents of an ashcan may provide material for a poem, belongs in the place of its origin, but it is conceivable that an excellent poem might result if looking into the ashcan produced a true excitement in the poet—an excitement comparable to what Keats experienced on looking into Chapman's Homer. Neither does it matter, as Dr. Zinsser remarks, whether the emotion is turbulent or peaceful. Again, what is vital is that it be real—neither a sentimental sham nor a reasoned presentation of a mental concept which, if worth presenting at all, would be more fitly presented in prose. I like, too, his emphasis on "fundamental" feelings or reflections. It would be difficult, I think, to find many of the world's great poems which do not rest on that broad base. We should all of us have satisfied ourselves by this time that there is no emotion which millions have not experienced before us, that there is no reflection on human life which was not already threadbare when Gutenberg set up his printing press. That is usually a discouraging thought to the very young, who must always discover for themselves, but it has proved no handicap to literature ever since man began to write it. The beauty of fundamental truths, whether in the form of feelings or reflections, is that they are for ever capable of being refurbished, of being made to shine as though they were new. For the writer who has sensitivity and power, they are a perpetual challenge. What distinguishes the poet from the rest of us is that his response to these fundamentals is readier and more intense, and his value for us is that through him we are able to share vicariously in that heightened awareness. By the freshness of his vision, by his nearness to seeing and feeling as if for the first time things which have been familiar to countless generations of men, we too are made more fully alive. In the words of Emerson, "all life remains unwritten still."

It is perfectly true, of course, that much exceedingly bad poetry has been written out of genuine emotion, just as much extremely clever verse has been written out of simulated emotion, or with no pretence of emotion, but I doubt that any profoundly moving

or deeply illuminating poem has ever been the product of mere contrivance. Some of the most graceful, some of the wittiest, some of the most delightful lines in English have been purely the product of intelligence and skill, but not such poems as Donne's "The Extasie" or Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." What the best of the neo-classical poets are able to give us is a purely mental delight in the nimble exercise of wits. Nor do I mean to undervalue, in poetry, the function of thought imposed upon emotion. I think it is fair to say, however, that even a poem whose basic intention is philosophical is the more energized for having its roots in emotional experience. It gains a warmth from that source which must inevitably be lacking in a solely intellectual concept. Great poetry has been written on three levels: that of pure emotion; that in which emotion and thought are combined; and that of abstract thought. If one were to divide the whole body of first-rate poetry into three such groups, I think the bulk would be found to fall in the group where emotion and thought are combined or related. Certainly it is on that level that the supreme expressions of the race in poetry are found: in the Bible, in Shakespeare, in Goethe.

I emphasize the fundamentals of emotion and communication because it is in these respects that poetry in our time has gone so far astray. In the matter of communication I am far from maintaining that a poem must have the clarity of good prose. As a matter of fact, Coleridge truly observed: "Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood." The trouble with so much of modern poetry has been that it has forgotten the qualification that Coleridge made when he used the word "generally." There is much in E. E. Cummings that I cannot read with pleasure because I am annoyed by his perverse and pointless eccentricities; yet while he has been, in the matter of technique, among the most radically experimental of contemporary poets, he is less often guilty of disregard for the fundamentals of which I have been speaking than some of his outwardly more traditional contemporaries. The following lines from his most

recent collection, 1 x 1, for example, illustrate very well Coleridge's distinction:

What if a much of a which of a wind
gives the truth to summer's lie;
bloodies with dizzying leaves the sun
and yanks immortal stars awry?
Blow king to beggar and queen to seem
(blow friend to fiend; blow space to time)
—when skies are hanged and oceans drowned,
the single secret will still be man

what if a keen of a lean wind flays
screaming hills with sleet and snow,
strangles valleys with ropes of thing
and stifles forests in white ago?
Blow hope to terror; blow seeing to blind
(blow pity to envy and soul to mind)
—whose hearts are mountains, roots are trees,
it's they shall cry hello to the spring

what if a dawn of a doom of a dream
bites this universe in two,
peels forever out of his grave
and sprinkles nowhere with me and you?
Blow soon to never and never to twice
(blow life to isn't; blow death to was)
—all nothing's only our hugest home;
the most who die, the more we live

Now there are several phrases among these lines from which it is difficult or impossible to extract a definite meaning, and yet the general import of what Cummings is saying is clear—the indeductibility of the spirit of man; what is more important still, the lines have the unmistakable impact and the magic which are poetry. Is it necessary to ask precisely what Cummings means by “stifles forests in white ago”? Isn't it sufficient that the phrase is strangely but powerfully suggestive?

3

Why is it that so much of modern poetry is not merely difficult but actually unintelligible? Difficult writing, which is frequently rewarding, is not peculiar to our time, but unintelligible writing is. Why has there been so much of it? Is it simply the product of literary snobbery? Only, I think, in part. John Sparrow, in his *Sense and Poetry*, throws some light on the matter. He points out that, in order to discuss the place of meaning in contemporary poetry, one must take into account the view of literature's function which has so deeply coloured so much writing in our time. Much of the world's great poetry, he reminds us, was written by those who believed that art is a kind of imitation, and that literature, consequently, should have as its aim the description of life. Upon that view was later superimposed the idea, of which Matthew Arnold stands as the foremost interpreter, that literature should be not merely a description but, in some sense, a criticism of life. That is a view which still has many adherents, of whom I am one, but for a time its truth was disputed by still another view, which came to the fore in the 'Nineties. This was the belief that literature requires no other justification if only it provides an escape from life, and that art is an independent kingdom within which it should be worshipped for its own sake. That view, too, still has its votaries, though they are now few in number.

But a very different idea has possessed the poets and the critics who have been most influential during the past quarter-century. They have taken the position that literature should not be content with either the description or the criticism of life. Its aim, they have insisted, must be to epitomize it. They have held that a piece of writing "should be an expression, as exact as possible, of some phase or moment of experience, that it should be the writer's aim to reproduce or to typify 'a consciousness.' " Now if you stop to think what the implications of such an attitude are, it becomes apparent that to hold such a view of the function of literature is to abandon the conception of literature as an art.

For what we are being asked to do is to accept what had hitherto been taken to be the raw material of art—that is, experience—as the finished product. And it follows that if modern literature should aim at being as nearly as possible like a piece of life, at reproducing as closely as possible a modern consciousness, it will, if successful, be, as Mr. Sparrow remarked, “in a large measure dull, shapeless, and depressing.” It must, moreover, be in large part unintelligible if it is to be true to human consciousness, for “Our experience is a series of happenings in which the senses play their part as well as the understanding; it is not ruled, as the understanding is, by a logical or intelligible scheme; a picture of our consciousness, therefore, if it is to be full, faithful, or merely typical, must include much that is outside the sphere of our understanding.”

These are results which we may observe, in their full flower, in such prose as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, and in far too much of the poetry that has been written in our time. The developments of modern psychology, with their emphasis upon the submerged part of our consciousness—the unconscious—have made writers feel obliged to include it in their transcript of experience. Nothing is more difficult or more likely to defeat its own purpose. And in the case of poetry, it has led to an indulgence in the use of personal imagery which has made it impossible for the reader, unless acquainted with the poet's outer and inner life, to know what he meant to convey. What, for example, was a reader to make of Edith Sitwell's words when she wrote of “Emily-coloured hands,” unless he happened to know that Miss Sitwell had as a child a nurse of that name whose hands were always afterwards associated in her mind with a certain colour? The poets have tried to have their cake and eat it too. In the effort to unite poetry and life they have been unable to abandon thought, as the Symbolists were willing to do, and the too frequent result has been absolute incoherence. As Mr. Sparrow remarks, “The writer, though he has a process of thought at the back, so to speak, of his mind, allows association to interfere at two stages—

both in determining the images by which he chooses to illustrate his thought, and in determining the connections between the various elements. He has not, in theory, abandoned meaning, but has allowed himself such freedom in the use he makes of association that his work is, in practice, impossible to understand."

There are signs, in the work of the younger poets who are just now beginning to publish, that much of the burden which poetry has been carrying during recent years is in process of being discarded. The young men are writing with greater simplicity and directness, and they are refreshingly less cerebral in their approach. There is, I firmly believe, a wider audience waiting for poets than they know. Never has the world more greatly needed what poetry has to give. There are two agencies by which the spirit of man has always been lifted up: poetry and faith. They answer deep-seated cravings, neither of which can be long denied. Ours is a generation surfeited with facts and starved for vision; overwhelmed by doubts and grasping for certainties.

The springs of poetry, no less than those of faith, have run perilously dry, but they will be replenished. They are already beginning to fill again as poets come out from the dark wood in which they have been wandering, as they realize anew that the first law of expression is communication. The audience is there, waiting, but they must speak to it and not to themselves.

CHAPTER TEN

ROOTS FOR AMERICA

I

WHAT do we mean when we talk about an American literature? What makes it our own? What gives it native flavour? Everybody is aware that there are no more dangerous generalizations than those which are made about national temperament and character. Yet they are sometimes helpful, and frequently valid. We speak of British tenacity, and who, after the Battle of Britain, could ever again doubt the truth of that generalization? So, too, it is a commonplace, the justice of which no one questions, to talk about grace and clarity, logic and wit as characteristic of French literature. And might we not say that English literature has always been distinguished by intense love of place, filled with echoes of John of Gaunt's soliloquy in *Richard II*—"This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England"? And is not Russian literature, at least in its great period, deeply coloured by a burning sense of man's duality—man-God, man-beast?

What, then, of ourselves? Have we as yet achieved a genuine native quality, a something which is unmistakably our own; and if so, what is it? We shall not have answered the question, surely, if we point merely to the use of American material, or the development of an American idiom. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry has reminded us, "What we call a nation is certainly not the sum of the religions, customs, cities, farms, and the rest that man's intelligence is able at any moment to add up. It is a Being." The use of native material does not of itself create the spirit of a national literature. The material must be assimilated, understood, interpreted; and if it is to be of interest beyond our own boundaries, it must be linked to the common experience of mankind.

It is more than a century ago that the confident voice of Emer-

son rang out in *The American Scholar*, and told American writers that they had "listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." He ended that memorable address upon a note of calm but resolute expectancy. Nothing that he wrote has greater force, greater truth, for us to-day. Whitman, in this his ardent disciple, was to repeat the challenge, and we have been conscious, intermittently, of their exhortations ever since. Too conscious, perhaps, like the adolescent who is impatient for the razor on his cheek. When was it we began to talk about the Great American Novel? A long time ago, surely. Never was there a people so impatient to be grown, so intensely interested in its own growing pains. We never tire of measuring ourselves, and how we love being measured!

I begin to think we shall always be that way, and I rather hope we shall. If there is anything which this nation has to give the world beyond its technological and organizing genius, it is surely that sense of expectancy which has possessed us as a people from the beginning, and which, up to this time, we have never completely lost. There are individual human beings like that, for whom the door to the future is always open. It is a trait which has its disadvantages, and sometimes they are heavy. It makes for easy trusting, and for over-confidence, but it is the nearest thing we know to perpetual youth.

The sense of expectancy—it lies at the core of all that Emerson wrote, and makes him, in his thought, the most truly representative American writer, even now. It is this same sense which informs the magnificent final sentences of Thoreau's *Walden*:

The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all our muskrats. . . . I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.

As Bernard De Voto pointed out in his *Mark Twain's America*, Huckleberry Finn, floating down the Mississippi,

speaks to the national shrewdness, facing adequately what he meets, succeeding by means of native intelligence whose roots are ours—and ours only. In a sense, he exists for a delight or wonder inseparable from the American race. This passage down the flooded river, through pageantry and spectacle, amid an infinite variety of life, something of surprise or gratification surely to be met with each new incident—it is the heritage of a nation not unjustly symbolized by the river's flow.

And Constance Lindsay Skinner, in projecting the *Rivers of America* series, was profoundly right in her feeling that the life of America is best studied and understood through the history of her rivers. She reminded us that

we began to be Americans on the rivers. By the rivers the explorers and fur traders entered America. The pioneers, who followed them, built their homes and raised their grain and stock generally at, or near, the mouths of rivers. As their numbers increased, they spread up the valleys, keeping close to the streams, since water is an indispensable element of the sustenance of the soil and all animal life. The rivers were the only highways of communication and commerce between solitary hamlets. Settlement expanded from the rivers. To repeat, the first foreigners on these shores began their transition from Europeans to Americans as River Folk.

First the rivers, and then the railways. Both have played a larger part in making us what we are than has been the case with any other people. It is not strange that they have coloured our imaginations so deeply. The rivers beckoned; so did the rails. The American sentiment about trains is something peculiar to ourselves; they have always been for us something much more than merely a mechanical means of getting from one place to another, and such a phrase as "on the wrong side of the tracks" has connotations which are definitely and distinctly American. And I

very much doubt whether the whistle of a steamboat or a locomotive has quite the same music for any other people.

Miss Skinner wondered if the fact that this nation came to birth upon the rivers had coloured the national temperament. "Are we," she asked, "a restless people because motion flowed by us continuously in our youth? Are we optimistic, eager, imaginative, daring and even recklessly experimental because of the beckoning of the tides 'bright with flashing light' which ran swiftly past our known shores into domains beyond our vision?" Perhaps; certainly both the river and the railway are symbols of expectancy. Both carry our eyes, and then our hearts and wills, beyond the bend.

We seem to keep this sense of expectancy even when we are most sharply critical of ourselves. Thus the novels that Sinclair Lewis wrote in his most effective period, though they are the product of irritation with certain aspects of American life, nevertheless end on a note of expectancy. Do you remember the last page of *Main Street*? Carol Kennicott has realized the ineffectiveness of her rebellion against Main Street standards, but when Doc Kennicott asks her, "Don't you ever get tired of fretting and stewing and experimenting?" she answers, "I haven't even started," and leading him to the nursery door, points to their sleeping child and exclaims, "Think what that baby will see and meddle with before she dies in the year 2000!" Reflectively, she goes on: "I've never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations, by pretending to have gone beyond them. I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be!" There is the true significance of *Main Street*, and that is why it could not be anything but an American book.

Babbitt, confiding in his son, regretfully aware that "practically, I've never done a single thing I've wanted to in my whole life," finds comfort in the thought that "maybe you'll carry things on further. I don't know. But I do get a kind of sneaking pleasure out of the fact that you knew what you wanted to do and did it." And Martin Arrowsmith, when we leave him, is saying,

"I feel as if I were really beginning to work now. This new quinine stuff may prove pretty good. We'll plug along on it for two or three years, and maybe we'll get something permanent—and 'probably we'll fail!'"

If there is a core of the American spirit, surely it must be this. The ideal of liberty is not something we can claim as peculiarly our own; men had died for it centuries before our beginnings as a people. But the sense of expectancy is something that *we* brought back into the world, a feeling that had been lost to men since the Renaissance. What is our passion for equality of opportunity, a passion that we have truly helped to communicate to the rest of the world, but a practical projection of our most indigenous quality? Not until we have lost it shall we know that we are old.

2

✓ If a people's literature must reflect its spirit, it must equally have its roots in self-knowledge. And we cannot know ourselves as a whole until we know the parts that make the sum of the whole. That is the value of regionalism in literature. There has been no healthier tendency in American creative writing during recent years than the re-emergence of vital regional writing. It is encouraging to see that tendency being fostered by the publishers, the universities, and other effective agencies. I have purposely used the word "re-emergence" because during the latter part of the last century and the early years of this, American regionalism had so degenerated as to assume merely a surface character. Van Wyck Brooks has defined the distinction very clearly; the local colourists who, like Bret Harte and John Fox, Jr., were concerned with pointing out "the 'differences' of local life, the elements of oddity and quaintness in the local scene," were far removed from a truly vital regionalism, which is not primarily concerned with local differences, but springs from "a self-identification with the local group to which one belonged, the group in which one's roots were most firmly embedded," and which

reasons that because of this, a writer so identified might more easily achieve the universal through the particular.

The revival of regional feeling in our literature has, moreover, been accompanied, in the period since the return of the expatriates, by a different attitude on the part of the writer towards his particular region. He is no longer so often in active revolt against his environment, as he is concerned with understanding it. You no longer catch as the dominant undertone in so many first novels the unhappy plaint: Why was I so unfortunate as to have been born in this place? Something of the same change in approach entered into the historical novel as well as into those which dealt with the contemporary scene. One has only to compare the historical romances which flourished at the turn of the century with the more realistic treatment in fiction of the American past which we have recently had, to observe again this effort at understanding, this conscious quest for values in the chosen period and region.

It is evident also that, even as the old regions which have been used by so many literary generations are still fertile ground for the writer capable of seeing them freshly, there are parts of the country which are still waiting for adequate creative treatment. The resources for literature of the Pacific North-West have scarcely been tapped; and we have seen recently, in such books as Conrad Richter's *The Sea of Grass* and Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident*, what can be done with material which up to now has been employed only in the manner common to the stock Western story. Both these books brought to their use of the Western range country something that went beyond the fast play of six-shooters and the clatter of hard-riding posses. They, and other books like them, have opened up the exciting vista of a new regional domain, because something more than its surface aspects and differences had been seized upon.

The first section of the country to feel the impact of this revived regionalism, through a large number of writers, was the Middle West, where it found even more vigorous expression in poetry

than in prose. But much of the Middle Western regionalism in fiction was sicklied over by the frame of mind in which it was written, by young men and women who had turned their backs on the land of their birth and were seeking the good life and the motivations for their work in the streets of Greenwich Village and the pavement cafés of Paris. I have purposely qualified my statement about the Middle West as being the first great region to experience this revival, because at the time when it began, Willa Cather was already dealing with life among the pioneers of the Great Plains, and Ellen Glasgow was at work on her social panorama of Virginia, but these two writers were not, as the Middle Western writers were, members of a group and participants in a movement. Nor, I think, can Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis be properly considered as members of that group, for although Anderson wrote revealingly of the village life in the Middle West, he was not so much its interpreter as he was the fascinated observer of his own spiritual confusion; and although Lewis set his Gopher Prairie and his Zenith on the fringes of the Middle West, he was actually concerned with characteristics and tendencies which he meant to describe as typically American.

There were, of course, during the 'Twenties, and a few years earlier, Middle Western writers of fiction who approached their material sympathetically. Zona Gale and Ruth Suckow were not violently at odds with their environment, and Glenway Wescott, although he joined the expatriates, and was to succumb to the cosmopolitanism which he embraced, wrote in *The Apple of the Eye* and *The Grandmothers* with what was close to nostalgia for the scenes of his youth. Booth Tarkington seemed always on the verge of arriving at a realism that he never achieved. The Middle West waits now for its new interpreters.

The regional ferment next began to stir in the South, where a group of writers rose to follow in the lonely footsteps of Miss Glasgow. They had, however, little in common beyond identification with their region. It is impossible to find a common denominator in writers of such diversified interests and methods

as Faulkner, DuBose Heyward, Julia Peterkin, Stark Young, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, and more recently, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Thomas Wolfe, James Still, Jesse Stuart, and Eudora Welty. There was, for example, combined in DuBose Heyward an understanding and realistic treatment of the negro (*Porgy* and *Mamba's Daughters*) with a nostalgic evocation of the old aristocratic South in *Peter Ashley*; Stark Young, a transplanted Southerner, brought sophistication to what, in *So Red the Rose*, was essentially a romantic recapturing of the best in an old and vanished culture. There was no meeting-place between them and Miss Roberts, writing with a fusion of poetry and realism about the tenant farmers of her native Kentucky, or with Mrs. Rawlings, breaking virgin ground in her stories of the Florida crackers. The truth is, of course, that what we call the South is a region of extraordinary diversity, of widely dissimilar background and traditions. Tidewater and up-country, Virginia and Georgia, Charleston and Miami, Texas and Kentucky—what have they in common except a larger share of negro population than is usual in other parts of the country? Besides the South, the states of the Middle West form an integral unit. Indeed, no half-truth has been more persistently overstated than the conventional generalization about the uniformity of American life. There are several Wests, as there are several Souths; there is more than one New England, and it will take more than chain stores, identical filling-stations, simultaneous movie releases, syndicated columnists, and coast-to-coast hook-ups, to reconcile their deep-seated differences. One of the by-products of a vital regionalism is the increasing awareness and appreciation of those differences which it can bring.

New England regionalism was fading into literary history when John P. Marquand, beginning with *The Late George Apley*, made it once more an effective agent in contemporary fiction, finding in his probing of the Bostonian state of mind implications that hold for men everywhere. Marquand's portrait of a Boston Brahmin of the old school, held fast in the grip of a tradition he could not break, was also the portrait of any man whose inner self is unable

to shake off the shackles of inheritance and environment. *H. M. Pulham, Esquire* was a contemporary treatment of the same theme, one in which the younger man made a greater, or at least more self-conscious effort to break loose from the pattern imposed by early training and circumstance. And *Wickford Point*, for all the lightness of its touch, a study in the disintegration and decay of an old New England family, would be just as valid if its people were settled in the Hudson River valley rather than north of Boston.

Curiously, the only prolific source of a regional revival in New England has been the state of Maine where, purely by accident, a group of writers emerged whose regionalism, in the work of Mary Ellen Chase, Rachel Field, Gladys Hasty Carroll, and Robert P. Tristram Coffin, took the form of a fictional re-creation of the past.

Indeed, the historical novel as written in the United States during the past twenty years has been very much a part of the regional revival. The Maine novelists, and writers like Walter D. Edmonds, with upstate New York as his territory, Esther Forbes, in her reconstructions of Colonial Massachusetts, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, writing of the settlement of Kentucky in *The Great Meadow*, H. L. Davis, with his exploration of Oregon's pioneer past in *Honey in the Horn*, Vardis Fisher, writing the story of the Mormons in *Children of God*, to name but a few, were working with regional fervour as much as with historical imagination.

3

It has been the critical fashion to deprecate the dominance of historical fiction during the past two decades, and to bewail the marked popular response to novels dealing with the American past. But I believe their vogue, by no means yet at an end, to have been a healthy, helpful, and even a necessary one. In part it has indicated, on the positive side, the recognition of a widespread need for identification with our roots as a people—a form, if you like, of that passion for security which has gripped, with a

new intensity, both individuals and nations in the modern world. To describe it merely as a form of escape from contemplation of the difficult present is to state only part of the truth, for it is only through the cool-minded contemplation of the past that we can arm ourselves against the present and the future. If the flood of historical novels, conceived, as so many of them have been, in a realistic and questioning frame of mind, has added but a little to our understanding of ourselves as a people and to a fuller appreciation of the qualities that have helped to make us a great nation, it has accomplished much.

Partly, I think, the vogue of the historical novel has been an expression of revolt against the excessively subjective content of writing on contemporary themes. Readers had grown tired of being dragged through the tortuous mazes of the novelist's unconscious self. They wanted, when they opened a book, to meet somebody else besides the author, wearing a thin disguise, his mother, who had smothered his emergent manhood under her possessive affection, and his father, who had savagely blunted the edge of his self-expression. They were also, I think, fed up with the atmosphere of frustration and defeat with which the novel of the contemporary scene was so completely saturated. It so happens that this country, whatever its failures and its fallingshort of the ideals in which it was conceived, is in possession of a heroic past. There are blots upon it, as there are blots upon nearly all heroic legends, but no amount of debunking can invalidate that central truth. We needed, very badly, to be reminded of that past, and of the courage with which its crises had been met.

Many reasons have been advanced for the extraordinary popularity which was enjoyed by Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, and there were, I believe, several factors in its appeal. It was certainly not a great novel, if we measure a novel's greatness by its reading of life, but its author had an uncommon narrative gift—she had the oldest of fiction's appeals, the ability to tell a story; she had a fetching title; she had for a subject the most romantic theme in American history, no matter how realistically

it may be approached; she had for a hero the kind of attractive, masterful scapegrace that so many women like to read about—although the appeal of *Gone With the Wind* was by no means limited to women. These were factors, of course, but I suspect that Henry C. Link was correct when he offered, in his *The Rediscovery of Man*, this likely explanation:

Scarlett, though in many ways not an admirable person, was a woman who remained for ever the master of her world rather than its victim. Neither war, nor disappointment in love, nor scandal, nor starvation, nor the burning of her home, nor the pain of childbirth, nor bloodshed, none of these catastrophes could daunt her spirit. Here was a woman who experienced in a short lifetime more tragedies than most people ever dream, who rushed to meet disaster, and emerged with courage unimpaired. Here was a woman who, to millions suffering the comparative luxuries of a depression to-day, exemplified a personal triumph over social insecurity. Ten million readers! Ten million nostalgic gasps from the victims of a machine concept of social security, a people still faintly protesting against the loss of their personal responsibility and power.

Time and again, in the historical novels of the period, there was this same emphasis upon individual or collective triumph over a threatening environment. It was the kind of reassurance that the American people needed to hear.

There would be little point, for the purposes of this book, to go beyond these general considerations to a particularized account of the historical novel as it has recently been written. Little of it, probably, will prove to be fiction of enduring quality. Kenneth Roberts, Walter Edmonds, Esther Forbes, James Boyd, Le Grand Cannon, and Howard Fast have been its most able and its most persistent practitioners. One could wish for the form a little more technical adventurousness, such as Miss Roberts brought to it in *The Great Meadow*; it has run too much to a sprawling, overlengthy pattern. It would seem as if most of the workers in this field, surrounded by the great mass of material gathered for the

writing of their stories, felt that they must allow none of it to go unused. Not only did Miss Roberts practise a welcome selectivity and write her story with a refreshing brevity; she brought to it as well philosophic overtones which gave it body and beauty. She showed how a great figure of her selected time and place, in this instance Daniel Boone, could be used to dominate the story while remaining for the most part in the shadowy background—and yet a presence and a force which moved behind every page.

If the historical novel has played its part in quickening regional consciousness, so, too, has the considerable body of writing other than fiction which has dug in the rich mine of American folk material. Roark Bradford returned to a vein that had been virtually untapped since Joel Chandler Harris wrote the Uncle Remus stories, and found new material in the wealth of negro folklore; several writers busied themselves collecting versions of the tall tales peculiar to the American frontier—the exploits of such legendary figures as Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Mike Fink, and Pecos Bill; Carl Carmer, as a temporary resident of the South and a native of New York State, delved into the folk history of Alabama and New York. J. Frank Dobie resurrected the folk stories of Texas and the South-West; Mary Austin, Oliver La Farge, and others found their material among the Indians of the same region.

All over the country regional magazines have been established in which many new writers have had their first audience; local historical societies have been filled with a fresh zeal or been newly created; state universities and cultural foundations have fostered the growth of regional knowledge; publishers have established prize awards for the best creative or historical work in a particular region. Constance Lindsay Skinner's *Rivers of America* series gave the signal for the launching of several other similar publishing enterprises, and nearly each succeeding year has seen some new approach to the regional interpretation of the United States.

In that more deeply integrated American culture which Emerson first foreshadowed in *The American Scholar* and which we

may some day fully realize, two races other than the white will have played a contributing part. We have in recent years become increasingly conscious of the negro's contribution. His spirituals, his sense of rhythm, his humour, his ability to live in the moment, have all worked their way into the intricate pattern of American life and its expression through the arts. He has himself produced and been the subject of literature of a high order, but the work that has been done is certain to be increased manifold. So, too, will the American Indian have played a part in the building of that culture. After Longfellow's *Hiawatha* the Indian as a source of literature, other than in books for boys, lagged behind the negro, but we are, fortunately, becoming more appreciative of the fact that he had a culture of his own before we, in our assumption of superior wisdom, undertook to tell him what was good for him and what was not. We were for a long time too busy elbowing him into corners to take stock of what he might have to teach us. We are only beginning to understand his deep and vital attachment to the natural world about him, an attachment which, in ourselves, has thinned to the danger point, if our lives are ever to be as fully integrated as his has been.

Some day, in a much more impressive manner than has yet been achieved, his story will be incorporated in our literature. There is in it ample material for an epic poem of noble proportions. As Stephen Vincent Benét wrote in his *Western Star*,

They were neither yelling demon nor Noble Savage,
They were a people.

A people not yet fused,
Made one into a whole nation, but beginning,
As the Gauls began, or the Britons that Cæsar found,
As the Greeks began in their time.

We can learn from the people with whom we signed treaties which, we said, would endure as long as the grass should grow, and which we broke. We can learn a discipline and a strength, and appreciate, even if we cannot attain, the serenity and the

unity with Nature which is written on the faces, even now, of the old men and women who live, out of our cheap bounty, on the Indian reservations. They have a great story, for which we wrote a tragic ending, and we shall do well to remember the Five Nations who learned to live in amity, the savages who brought corn to the starving men of Jamestown, Squanto, who trod out the eels for the dying Puritans, King Philip, and the Cherokees, Black Hawk and Crazy Horse.

4

In that very lively and often illuminating book, the *Avowals* of George Moore, there is a passage about the distinction between what is romantic and what is classical which, to my mind, at least, sweeps the dust away from what has so often been an arid and unprofitable argument. Moore, with his agile fancy, manages to breathe life into what has more frequently than not been a dull and academic question. He suggests that if we were to substitute the words folk and culture for the words classical and romantic, we should be more likely to understand what is really meant by those two embattled terms.

Art, says Moore—and who will dispute it?—

begins in the irresponsible imaginations of the people, like a spring in a mountain waste; the spring rises amid rocks, trickles and forms a rivulet, swells into a stream and after many wanderings, perhaps after a brief sojourn in artificial ponds and basins, it returns to the earth whence it came. And if this be the natural history of art, Homer is art emerging out of folk, and Sophocles is art at the extreme point of culture—the point at which art must begin to decay. In Shakespeare we find culture and folk side by side; and sometimes, as in *Hamlet*, we assist at the shearing away of the folk element from the tale. *As You Like It* is folk in substance; the various dukes and the forest denizens are pure folk; but the writing is culture.

Moore proceeds to apply this notion that classic art is essentially

a shedding of the folklore element out of which art is for ever rising, to the history of painting and architecture. There was Pinturicchio

who seems to us a very tale-teller among people emerging from the religious gloom of the Middle Ages; we might almost call him the pavement artist of an artistic period; we find him in the midst of religious processions, in narrow Gothic streets, always delightfully spontaneous, telling tales of saints and miracles, and always heedless of culture—that is to say, of proportions and anatomies. Culture enters in the person of Botticelli; he represents it in its first stage and Raphael represents it in its last, just before art begins to slip into decadence.

The idea occurs to Moore in the course of his reflections on the realism of Tolstoy. He observes acutely that the realism of *War and Peace* is in a measure the realism of children—"the realism of the early Italian painters who stop at the wayside to tease a beetle, to investigate a bush." It would not surprise him, he remarks, if some part of Tolstoy's realism were a folk inheritance. He reminds us that whereas Flaubert, who is obviously a classical writer in the sense in which Moore is using the term, "described Madame Bovary's house because she lived there always, Tolstoy described an inn through which some travellers pass, telling, among many other things, the number of freckles on the nose of the servant girl who brings in the samovar. Yes; his realism is as irrelevant as that of the painter Pinturicchio, who introduced quails picking grain about the embowered throne of the Virgin surrounded by saints and angels."

Now, if we accept Moore's theory as valid, if the revitalization of art demands the reintroduction of the folklore quality, we immediately encounter some rather disturbing consequences. As civilizations mature it becomes harder, naturally, to recapture that quality. Art, in our own time—in painting, in sculpture, in architecture and in literature—has shown itself desperately grasping after the equivalent of such material. Where the native folk stuff had been exhausted, didn't artists try to find renewal in the

primitive, even going so far as to seek it in cultures as remote from their own as that of the African negro? May we not even interpret the use by our own novelists of such uncomplicated characters as the *paisanos* of Steinbeck, or on a still lower level, the moronic creatures of *Tobacco Road*, as fundamentally a groping for that quality? The phantasmagoria of the surrealists—are not these basically our equivalents for the myths and superstitions of a people still on the naïve level of culture? What was Jean Giono doing in France but finding among the peasants of the Basses-Alpes a primitive backwater of an age which he could contemplate only with disgust? What was the rise of the functional in architecture but a return to the simple forms in which men, in their first creative stirrings, make the things which they use?

Yet for us, here in America, the idea need not be disquieting. We have only recently come in close touch, creatively, with a folk material the richness of which we are only beginning to realize. There was a time, even, when we allowed ourselves to be persuaded that we had none. Now we know that if art can be revitalized anywhere in the world, it is in these United States.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SHAPE OF BOOKS TO COME

I

IF this book has accomplished its basic purpose, it has established the fact that American literature has for the past twenty-five years been caught, so to speak, in the trough of the wave. I have not meant to say that our literature has been sterile or that it has been lacking in vitality. That would be, to my mind, a silly and unsupportable contention. The Nineteen-twenties and the 'Thirties were, as we have seen, decades of unquestioned vitality. There was even, you might say, a renaissance of creative activity which extended to all the arts; an activity that was restlessly experimental and severely critical of much in the common fabric of American life. It was, moreover, an activity which was allied to a general quickening and spread of cultural interest throughout the United States, manifest in the growth of popular interest in painting and the graphic arts, in the greatly increased number of local symphony orchestras, the revival of the little theatres, and the birth of the summer stock company, in the much larger amount of space devoted to books by newspapers and other periodicals, and in the quest for new means and techniques by which to foster their wider distribution.

But it is my contention that this creative activity, even though it was a part of a general cultural ferment, was not yet resting on a sufficiently sound and positive base; that it was muddled in its aims and values; that it was too often addressed to an inner circle and too readily contemptuous of the interests and needs of the average intelligent reader. I believe that it lacked humane aspiration and spiritual direction, that in large measure it denied the dignity and worth of the human spirit, that it failed, even, fully to envisage the democratic vision for which this war has been fought.

I believe also that all these objections to the creative temper of the past quarter-century which I have raised are, one by one and little by little, being made invalid, and that they will have only a minimum of truth in application to the literature now in process of being born. This is as much a fervid conviction as it is an earnest hope.

And so I arrive at the subject of this concluding chapter, which will venture a few thoughts about the probable shape of books to come. Just what changes in temper and attitude may we reasonably look for in the literature of the post-war world? The hazards of prophecy are proverbial, and the field of literature is, perhaps, less immune to these dangers than any other. Nevertheless, there are certain broad and inevitable movements which apply both to life and to literature, and which of necessity must play a part in setting the shape of the books that are to come.

What I have in mind first of all is the eternal law of compensation, the swing of the pendulum. Emerson read us the lesson long ago, but we had forgotten. In literature, as in life, the balance is always being restored; we never stay fixed at one extreme. In literature, as in life, we need to keep always in our minds the realization that there is a polarity which governs all things that are alive: sleeping and waking, hunger and fullness, defeat and victory, with death itself at the opposite pole from life.

We all know that our own literature, in common with that of other countries, was deeply and widely affected by the last war. The conflict itself and its aftermath in the form of an abortive peace gave a tremendous additional impetus to tendencies and forces which were already in operation. The mood of profound disillusionment which was induced, particularly in the young, and especially in the writers who were to give direction to the literature of the past twenty-five years, served to accelerate those tendencies and forces which were, in the main, negative in character. It was a world which felt itself increasingly bereft of certainties and assurances. More and more insistently, the old values were questioned, flouted, or ignored. An all-embracing

cynicism was in the saddle. Our books found little or nothing to affirm, little or nothing in which to believe. It was a literature which, as I have just remarked, had often unquestionable vitality, and yet in that very vitality there was not infrequently no genuine love of life, but rather a feverish and savage attack upon it. There was, one might almost say, in the prevailing attitude a refusal to see the good mixed with the evil.

It is needless, I think, to emphasize the point that profound alternations of mood are nothing new in the history of literature, being as they are in the nature of a life principle. But I should like to draw attention to one of them, remote from us in time, but otherwise startlingly near. In his excellent book, *The Essential Shakespeare*, Mr. J. Dover Wilson draws a striking parallel between the mood in which Shakespeare, among other writers, was engulfed at the time when he was writing the bitter comedies of his later period, and that which overtook our own writers in the years immediately following the First World War. *Measure for Measure*, Mr. Wilson reminds us, is written in much the same key as *Point Counter Point* and others of Aldous Huxley's earlier novels: "the hatred of sentimentalism and romance, the savage determination to tear aside all veils, to expose reality in its cruelty and hideousness, the self-laceration, weariness, discord, cynicism and disgust of our modern 'literature of negation' all belonged to Shakespeare about 1603."

Equally interesting is the fact that the circumstances which contributed to this mood were very similar to those which produced our own. The World War, remarks Mr. Wilson, "which began in a temper of exaltation, best expressed in the poetry of Rupert Brooke, ended in a holocaust of blood and mud, and was followed—our war to end war—by the cynical peace of Versailles. The Elizabethan catastrophe described the same curve within a narrower ambit: national elation after the defeat of the Armada, best expressed in *Henry V*, the crash of Essex, and the squalid peace of James." One must remember what a shining symbol the youthful Earl of Essex was: "the principal star in the Elizabethan

firmament for the last ten years of the century suddenly fell like Lucifer from heaven; and his catastrophe shook men's souls with terror and amazement as at some monstrous disaster in the skies."

Still more profound though our reaction was, produced by forces so much wider and deeper, yet there has already been apparent an upswing of the pendulum which has shown itself in a quest for values, in a drift towards affirmation rather than negation. To continue for a moment more the parallel with the Elizabethans, we may remind ourselves that if Shakespeare matched our cynicism and disgust in the comedies of his dark period, he moreover plumbed, in *Othello* and *Hamlet*, and above all in *Timon of Athens* and *King Lear*, depths of human agony where we, in our books, have never descended. But, as Mr. Wilson points out, "as the forces of evil close in upon him, as the possibilities of human bestiality are more and more revealed, there are revealed at the same time other possibilities, possibilities of nobility of spirit and grandeur, of magnificent and indomitable will, of sheer exuberant vitality as great in its way as Falstaff's." The battle which Shakespeare fought within himself, a battle which brought him, as the plays attest, to the edge of the abyss, but from which he moved into the serenity of his final period, is one that is being fought, with an intensity depending on his personal needs, by every serious writer in our time.

It is this groping for solid ground beneath their feet, aided as it is by the underlying pull of compensatory law, which has turned the swing of the pendulum. But we may well ask ourselves, will its now perceptible movement be arrested in its upward course? If we did not enter the Second World War with the same illusions which accompanied us into the first, is there not an equal danger that we may face bitter disappointments when the peace is made? And if they should come, will we not see our literature again taking the course which it followed during the 'Twenties and into the 'Thirties? If, indeed, it does not plunge into a still deeper despair. There are grounds, I believe, for the hope that we shall not.

2

First of all, and to my mind this is most important, let us keep before us the fact that there was a marked difference in the temper and attitude with which the two generations went to war. The generation that fought last time was much more romantic, more unreservedly idealistic in its approach. As a member of it, I recall vividly the atmosphere of exaltation—there is no other word for what was in the air—in which so many of us lived through our ninety days at the First Plattsburg Camp. So many of those boys were starry-eyed even when they were jocular, even when they kidded one another about the casualty rate among lieutenants. Feeling as they did, their reaction to the realities which followed, both of the war and the peace, was in many cases intense. This was particularly true, of course, of those more sensitively organized youngsters from whose ranks were to come so many of the writers who moved to the fore during the period now drawing to a close. They were conditioned for a tremendous let-down.

These things are not true of the generation which fought the later war. They went into it clear, not starry-eyed, and questioning, but aware that it was a dirty job which must be done. They had grown up in an atmosphere, not of vibrant hope, but of profound and disturbing disillusion. They sucked it in, one might almost say, with their mothers' milk. It permeated the books they read, the plays they saw, the talk they heard. They were sceptics from the cradle. But—and this may be the gift they bring to the years ahead—they were already profoundly aware of the need for a new or renewed set of values, for a faith in something larger and more real than their fathers had found. One of the most heartening things in the colleges now—to speak of but one instance of the difference between them and the preceding generation—is their reported rejection of material success as a dominant guide and motive.

There is yet another respect in which the present war genera-

tion promises to differ from its predecessor. It seems to me by far the most important of these differences, and one which may well have a deep and widespread effect upon the quality of American life, and thus upon the temper and quality of American literature. It is the restoration to American society of a factor which has been mainly lacking in our life since the Civil War: the attainment of maturity in youth. Our participation in World War I was not sufficiently long or embracing enough, nor the character of the war itself of a kind to make that contribution possible.

But when one stops to consider the number of American boys still in their twenties who have in this war assumed and carried responsibilities customarily well beyond their years—the hundreds of thousands who have commanded small ships, companies and battalions, bomber crews and squadrons—one must believe that their newly acquired initiative and judgment and understanding of other men will be carried over into civil life when they return. Never in history, perhaps, has youth contributed so much to the winning of a war, and of a long and bitter war, other than the age-old sacrifice of life and limb that has always been its portion. This has been a young man's war to a greater degree than any ever fought. The young men know that, and they know that they have proved themselves; unless I am much mistaken, they will be determined to make their voices heard and their influence felt in a measure far beyond any war generation that we have known.

Maturity in youth was commonly developed in the earlier generations of American life, in the natural schooling of the frontier, and on the seas where Yankee skippers, many of them young men, roamed the world as Americans of their years have seldom done since. The economic and social structure permitting and even demanding it, the young men began raising families, and large ones at that, almost a decade earlier than their descendants of recent generations. This war has fostered earlier marriages too, though many of them have been so hastily entered that the wreckage is likely to be abnormally large.

It seems reasonable to expect, then, that this entry on the credit side of the war should inject a new force into the national spirit during the years just ahead—a force that should be steady-ing as well as energizing in effect. The attitudes which it has created will necessarily be reflected in the books this war generation will write. I know that I have already encountered indications among the returning men that they will regard much of the “hard-boiled” writing of their fathers as self-conscious, adolescent stuff.

They will, I think, be better able to maintain their balance and their perspective than those who went before them. Whether or not our hopes of a reconstructed world are realized, the soldiers of this war will, I believe, be better armed against such failures as we must be prepared to meet. There is, too, the further consideration that they, like all of us, are to-day more clearly and fully aware of the nature of the evil which we have been fighting; and also more clearly and fully aware of what, fundamentally, we are resolved to uphold. We know now how serious is the threat to that spirit of free co-operation among men which lies at the heart of English liberty and ours: We realize that to possess, to cherish and to preserve that spirit is the mark of the truly civilized man. Even though we have found no other faith, we do have faith in that spirit, which is something larger than ourselves.

For some time now it has been apparent that the need for such a faith, in one form or another, has become too insistent to be denied. That need will, I think, be increasingly reflected and in some measure fed by the books that are to come. Novels with a religious theme have always found a wide audience in the United States, but recently there has been a persistence about their popularity, and an increase in their number, which I believe is worth noting. For more than two years first place on the lists of best-selling fiction was occupied in succession by three books of this character. Each of them was centrally concerned with the phenomenon of faith, each of them was written around man's relation to God.

First there was Dr. Cronin's *The Keys of the Kingdom*, then Franz Werfel's *The Song of Bernadette*, and finally, Lloyd Douglas's *The Robe*. Not long after they had receded on the lists still another book in the same category, *The Apostle* by Sholem Asch, forged to the front. Still more recently we had the interesting spectacle of a writer whose previous work had been decidedly of a more mundane cast—I refer to W. Somerset Maugham—putting forth, in *The Razor's Edge*, a novel with a spiritual quest for its theme; at about the same time this master of brittle and sophisticated drawing-room comedy brought to Broadway his play *Sheppey*, which turned upon the efforts of a little Cockney barber to model his life on that of Jesus Christ.

Now it would be unreasonable, I submit, to deny some significance to the pattern thus established. None of these books was a great book, unless that adjective is loosely applied in the manner of the delirious 'Twenties; but one at least, Mr. Werfel's *Bernadette*, was marked by a passionate sincerity. Regardless of their value as literature, in which they vary widely, the response with which they have been met is evidence, it seems to me, of the hunger for belief, the groping for faith and the need for recovery of values which has been mounting among us. Whether the world is to witness, as many are coming to believe, a great religious revival, I do not know; it is hard to say how much weight should be attached, for instance, to the undeniable quickening of religious feeling among the armed forces abroad, since it has occurred under conditions of abnormal strain and stress. However that may be, certainly the revival of faith in *some form must go on*. Man cannot live and grow on despair, and no literature can contribute greatly to life, can bring to it that illumination which is its highest service, unless it can find and hold before us values which are positive and constructive.

So that such indications as these—the closely repeated presence of such books on the best-seller lists—may represent actually nothing more than an admission of the desire for some spiritual base. The seeds of this change have been present in our books for

some time past. It was implicit even in the flood of self-help books that have been crowding the counters every year; it was evident in the eagerness with which other shoddy substitutes for spiritual sustenance were accepted, as in the shallow mysticism of such novels as Charles Morgan's *The Fountain* and *Sparkenbroke*. Even though they may point to nothing more than an emptiness waiting to be filled, there have been other indications of a more distinctly positive character which do point definitely in the direction of affirmation, and which, I think, support my conviction that the pendulum has begun its upward swing.

The trend has by no means, however, been confined to fiction. Arthur Koestler, whose books are arousing much interest in America, is arguing the necessity, if the Western world is to escape cultural destruction, of a recapturing on its part of the contemplative life. We must, he is convinced, draw upon the age-old wisdom of the East; the same conviction lies at the bottom of Mr. Maugham's recent fiction, and he is now engaged upon an imaginative treatment of the life of Mohammed. In poetry, W. H. Auden has turned for guidance from Marx to Kierkegaard, and the religious note sounds insistently in the work of our soldier poets at home and overseas. *The Screwtape Letters* of C. S. Lewis have made a deep impression on American readers, and so has his *The Problem of Pain*. Writers like Harry Emerson Fosdick (primarily known as a clergyman) and Henry C. Link (a practising psychologist) attract a large and increasing body of readers by their combination of popularized psychology with religious affirmation. All these very definite tendencies point clearly in one direction.

There was for me, in this respect, a very suggestive significance in the change of temper which marked Ernest Hemingway's latest novel. Here was a writer who had embodied in his previous work to a markedly complete degree that spirit of negation which saturated the literature of the Nineteen-twenties, now adopting in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* a definite tone of affirmation. We had the first hint of this change in the noble passage from John Donne

which is printed opposite the title page, and from which the title is taken:

No man is an Island, intire of itselfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of, the maine; if a Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde: And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Between Lieutenant Henry of *A Farewell to Arms* (not to speak of those bewildered unhappy ghosts who flit through the pages of *The Sun Also Rises*), who was embarrassed by the words sacred and glorious and sacrifice, and Robert Jordan of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, a chasm has been bridged. It would not have been possible for one of Hemingway's earlier characters to have said, as Jordan does when he lies waiting for death on the hill slope above the dynamited bridge, "I have fought for what I believed in for a year now. If we win here we will win everywhere. The world is a fine place and worth the fighting for, and I hate very much to leave it."

It is, I think, a very palpable straw in the wind when the central character in a Hemingway novel declares his belief that "the world is a fine place and worth the fighting for." Nowhere in the American fiction of his generation had its disillusionment been more consciously and consistently set forth than in his previous work. Nor should it be forgotten that a parallel change, striking an even deeper note, took place several years earlier in the work of Aldous Huxley. Perhaps the publication in 1936 of *Eyeless in Gaza* may come to be a sort of bench mark in the history of twentieth-century fiction. It sounded the first strongly affirmative note in the creative literature of the post-war years, and it was all the more arresting because it came from a writer whose work had been the embodiment of cynicism and despair. If the earlier novels of Aldous Huxley, culminating in the mocking nihilism of *Brave New World*, were to be characterized in a single phrase, it must be said of them that they reflected a hatred of human life.

The line from which Huxley derived his title is from Milton, and refers to Samson, blinded by the Philistines. So too, figuratively speaking, was Anthony Beavis, the protagonist of the novel, who grows to maturity in the early post-war world, and is content, until he is past forty, to accept its values or the lack of them, and to live accordingly. Then, through a chance meeting with an older man, he begins to see, it seems to him, for the first time, clearly. He comes to the conviction that life can be bettered only by the assumption of individual responsibility, that there is no escape through systems of collective action, either from the threat of war which overshadows his world or from insecurity in daily living. It seems to him that it is possible to maintain a consistent idealism only in our personal relations, and even there with difficulty; that a consistent collective idealism is impossible for nations and governments, without the individual assumption of responsibility. Peace for the individual, peace for the world, he believes, can be attained only through the individual exercise of love and compassion. He has arrived, he feels, at faith of a kind, by means of which it will be possible for him to live purposefully.

To return for a moment to Werfel's *Bernadette*: in the Personal Preface he says that he has aimed in his work—and he is not speaking of *Bernadette* alone—to “magnify the divine mystery and the holiness of man—careless of a period which has turned away with scorn and rage and indifference from these ultimate values of our mortal lot.” Yet, strangely enough, he has since expressed his belief that the reason why *Bernadette* has found so big an audience is because, whether they know it or not, people respond to poetry, and, as his title indicates, he thinks of his story as being essentially an epic poem. While I share Mr. Werfel's belief in poetry's appeal, I wonder if the answer to *Bernadette*'s popularity does not really lie, aside from the story's aura of mystery, in the habitual content of epic poetry. It is not doubting, or negative, or despairing, as lyric poetry so frequently is, particularly in our own time. Epic poetry celebrates and affirms.

That, I believe, is why readers turned to Mr. Werfel's book and were stirred by it. The story of the peasant girl of Lourdes who was to take her place among the saints of the Roman Catholic Church is a story of great humility, great love, great courage, great faith. He has told it with the sensitive understanding of an artist who turned to his theme, furthermore, because of an intense personal experience. Mr. Douglas, though he is no artist, was similarly concerned with the greatest of all such stories. He wrote of the impact of Jesus upon the Roman world. Dr. Cronin, in *The Keys of the Kingdom*, was occupied with the same values—humility, love, courage, faith—and exemplified them in the life of a modern man. In his own peculiar way, William Saroyan has been fumbling after the same thing. Thornton Wilder captured the gleam of it in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, in *Heaven's My Destination* and the play *Our Town*—and lost it in the pretentious jugglery of *The Skin of Our Teeth*. There are straws in the wind, and a moving finger on the wall.

3

During the years since the two books by Huxley and Hemingway were published, the affirmative tone in contemporary writing has steadily strengthened. The shift in emphasis has been accompanied by no retreat from the realistic attitude, but to that attitude, with its determination to observe and present life as it is, has been increasingly added a sense of the life which ought to be. Such a novel as Richard Llewelyn's *How Green Was My Valley*—strangely followed, I admit, by the same author's bleakly hopeless and, to my mind, distinctly inferior *None But the Lonely Heart*—is, I think, typical of this altered temper. Its picture of life in a Welsh mining village made no attempt to blot out the shadows, but it found room also for positive values. It could see human nature as bent but resilient.

The same temper was to be observed in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, which enjoyed such widespread popularity and

critical acclaim during 1943 and 1944. The same novel, written during the 'Twenties, would beyond a doubt have offered no relief to its drab background; there would have been no green leaves on the tree. A similar affirmative note was the major one in another novel which was equally well received at about the same time—John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano*. A writer of far greater potentialities—he is, to my way of thinking, the most promising figure on the American literary horizon since the arrival of John Steinbeck—Hersey seems equipped to answer a deep-seated need among readers of contemporary fiction.

Several years ago those who were on the alert for a change in the prevailing temper of contemporary fiction noted with satisfaction the American publication of a novel called *No Arms, No Armour*, by a British soldier, Colonel Robert Henriques. Here again, in a writer of obviously great potentialities, there was an emphasis upon the reality and the importance of man's inner life. It was this aspect of Colonel Henriques's novel, I am convinced, rather than his gently effective twitting of the Colonel Blimps, though that too was enjoyed, which drew attention to his book. The same quality appeared again in his second novel, *The Voice of the Trumpet*. To my mind, he is the most interesting British novelist who has emerged during the war period. Our own war novels have not as yet, any more than the British, crystallized into an attitude. Mr. Hersey's book deals with one of the backwaters of the war, but those which find their material either at the actual fronts or in the adjustment to home of soldiers and sailors who have already returned even now reveal, in some instances, a reflective quality which was absent from our war fiction that came on the heels of World War I. You will find it even in such a book as Harry Brown's *A Walk in the Sun*, which basically undertakes to do no more than report as accurately as possible the reactions of a platoon engaged in a minor action. These men are writing, too, with a less jaundiced view of human nature (although keenly aware of its imperfections and its bestial depths) than did their fathers. "I'm fed up," a twenty-six-year-old major

of marines, back from two years of hard fighting in the Pacific, said to me, "with reading about tough guys."

I believe that for some time now there has been growing among readers a quiet but stubborn rebellion against a world peopled exclusively by sadists, nymphomaniacs, double-crossers, chisellers, half-wits, ape-men, and other occasional products of the law of natural selection. Most of us in the course of a lifetime have now and then met one or two decent, intelligent, fair-dealing human beings and have enjoyed their companionship, but not a few aspiring novelists during the last twenty years or so seem to have been denied that privilege, and have been fiercely determined that nobody else, at least in so far as books provide an opportunity, should have it either. For that reason, as well as others, numerous citizens were greatly pleased to make the acquaintance of Major Victor Joppolo, in the novel which Mr. Hersey based on the Italian campaign. True, the book also contains a distinctly unsatisfactory specimen of humanity who goes by the name of General Marvin, as well as sundry Italians who exhibit frailties common to humankind, but I think we may congratulate ourselves as well as Mr. Hersey that he did not feel it incumbent upon him to convince us that the entire American army is made up of General Marvins and other equally unpleasant variants of his type, or that the town of Adano is a stinking sink of human iniquity.

Mr. Hersey, it so happens, is a realistically minded young man, who up to the present, at least, has found some ground for belief in the existence of occasional goodwill among his fellows. There is already evident in his writing that basic quality which a front-rank novelist must have—a consuming interest in men and women and a genuine love for them. Good novels have been written by men who had a great interest in humankind but no great love for individual members of their species; the great novelist must have both. No man could have drawn the portrait of Major Joppolo with the sympathy and understanding which Mr. Hersey brought to his depiction of that character who did not regard the human

animal with affection. That goes also for the minor figures: for the Italian peasants whose weaknesses and strengths, whose crotchets and amiabilities he views with such humorous and tolerant but undeceived eyes. Even the blistering portrayal of the general is the product not of malice but of an outraged sense of human decency.

Here in the United States the note of affirmation has been especially evident in the change which has taken place in our regional writing. That long procession of novels prompted by the young author's revolt against his environment came gradually to a halt. In their place came more and more books whose authors were trying to understand and interpret the regions in which they had their roots. Since the return of the expatriates this tendency has measurably grown. It will, I am confident, receive still further impetus after the armed forces have come back from abroad. The writers among them share with the rest a feeling for place and a recognition of their roots which has never been stronger among young Americans than it is to-day. That their hunger for home will be reflected in the books of the post-war world seems to me a reasonable expectation.

In biography, too, there has been a shift from a prevailing destructive purpose to a constructive one. We have already travelled a long way since the "debunking" period was at its height. The game of belittling the great got to be pretty tiresome, and led only to a dead-end. There has been an increasing number of books during recent years which were concerned with putting the subject in a fairer light, or with giving overdue attention to some previously neglected figure.

So, too, with the reappearance in our writing of honest sentiment, as opposed to sentimentality. We had grown so fearful of the latter, in our healthy determination to attack hypocrisy and cant, smugness and humbug, that we ended by confusing sentimentality and sentiment, and forgot that there is a dividing line between the two. It seems to me evident that we are beginning to shed this fear of an honestly expressed emotion (for it is the

presence or absence of honesty which marks the distinction) and that the expression of such feeling will be more manifest in the books that are to come.

4

There is still another respect in which I think a change is impending. We have been living, as we all know, through a period of intense perplexity, a period in which the individual has been tremendously occupied with himself. Although it is a state of mind which has been especially acute among men and women of intellectual pretensions, and so among our writers, the malady has by no means been confined to them. If it had been, there would have been nothing like the market which has existed for the self-help books to which I referred earlier. The mark of this self-absorption has been plain upon our books. It has, I think, been one of the reasons why our poets have felt impelled to draw so heavily upon a private imagery which could mean nothing to the reader who had no means of knowing what had been passing through the poet's mind. It betrayed itself as well in the quantity of intensely autobiographical novels which we produced—novels written about a central figure who was the author himself, novels which did not look out upon life, but in which the writer's attention was directed within himself.

That period of perplexity has by no means ended, but I think it is by no means unreasonable to assume that as the spirit of negation subsides, as there is growing recognition of the need for identification with forces greater than one can find within oneself, there will be a lessening of morbid introspection among our writers. The war itself, of course, has been an impelling force in that direction, but that has been merely a temporary stimulus, and must be replaced, when that stimulus is gone, by something within the individual himself.

Finally, I believe that in the shape of books to come we shall observe a reawakened sense of the writer's responsibility to the

reader. I mean responsibility in terms of communication. Very definitely, the tide has set in against the esoteric and obscure. We are emerging from a period of intense experimentation in all the arts. During such periods the artist tends to become oblivious of his social function. There is a stoppage of that "fluid" which Victor Hugo described as running between the writer and his reader, in a stream from which they both draw strength, and which Van Wyck Brooks has defined as "the sense of a shared experience, a common fund of understanding, a fund of sufferings and longings realized in common."

There is, no doubt, a kind of necessary alternation in this turning away from public acceptance and the subsequent return to it. In the experimental period, art renews itself, works upon new techniques, widens its horizons. During this time it scorns the applause of the multitude, addresses itself to the chosen few, and finds their approval sufficient. Unfortunately for the public, when such fundamental changes in mood and in the approach to art are in the air, it is, in most cases, the more vigorous, the more original, the more adventurous minds which carry the new trends to their extremes. The wider public which the experimenters might have reached gives its attention to inferior stuff. It turns to the lesser craftsmen who speak a language which it can understand. It accepts the shoddy and the pattern-made, because it feels at least that the creator is speaking to it in terms of its experience as well as of his own.

We commonly accept the Elizabethan age as one of the greatest brief periods of creative flowering that literature has known. Mr. E. M. W. Tillyard, in his recently published *The Elizabethan World Picture*, finds in the literary history of the quarter-century from 1580 to 1605—"the 'real' Elizabethan age"—confirmation of the old truth that "the greatest things in literature are the most commonplace." He has sought to show in his book how much more commonplace than might be supposed "is the substance of some of the writing that appears (and of course in a sense is) most novel and most characteristic of its author. Raleigh's remarks on

the glories of creation and on death, Shakespeare's on the state of man in the world seem to be utterly their own, as if compounded of their very life-blood; divested of their literary form they are the common property of every third-rate mind of the age. . . . The truth is illustrated that the poet is most individual when most orthodox and of his age. . . ."

When the experimenters have accomplished their work of cutting away the dry rot of outworn attitudes and forms, art is ready to turn outwards again and to re-establish the connection between itself and the social order, in which, to fulfil its function completely, it must play its part. This is already happening. Literature, in common with the other arts, is reaching out towards a wider audience, coming closer again to its beliefs and aspirations. And when it does that, a vital current begins to vibrate. It is in such times that art enters upon its great periods. We have been resting in the trough of the wave, the horizon blotted out; but we shall once again be carried to the crest.

EPILOGUE

IT was with no little amazement that I recently observed so sensitive a critic as Mr. Edmund Wilson raising a lament for the departed 'Twenties. It seemed to him, watching the flood of "imitation books" pouring from the presses during the years that have followed, that the 'Twenties provided an atmosphere much more favourable to writers than that of to-day. He was not basing his contention upon the fact that we were a nation whose thoughts were largely occupied with the winning of the war, but upon the difference he perceived between the intellectual and social climate obtaining in the years just preceding the Great Depression and that which has since prevailed.

Disconsolately, he remembered of people then how much freer they were—"in their emotion, in their ideas, and in expressing themselves. In the 'Twenties they could love, they could travel, they could stay up late at night, as extravagantly as they pleased; they could think or say or write whatever seemed to them amusing or interesting." He realized how "recklessly clever it used to be possible for people to be, and how personal and how direct."

But with the coming of the Depression, this happy state was shattered. "The whole artistic and intellectual world became anxiously preoccupied with making sure that their positions were correct in relation to the capitalist system and the imminence or the non-imminence of a social revolution; they spent a good deal of time and print arguing with one another about it. Some writers who had been basing their work on the uproar and glamour of the boom grew discouraged and more or less stopped. The young writers who came out of college were short of cash and had no prospect of easy jobs; they were obliged to be circumspect."

Let us look coolly at this "freedom" of the 'Twenties. Wasn't the atmosphere charged with its own peculiar prohibitions?

Wasn't it *de rigueur* for every writer with serious pretensions to have no faith in anything, save, possibly, the gospel according to St. Marx; wasn't it obligatory to flee like a frightened hare from anything remotely resembling sentiment, however honest, lest one be accused of sentimentality? Wasn't it necessary, if you were to be thought of as a modern, to find cosmic significance in the antics of Krazy Kat, and sense in gibberish? I think we have already come a long way from those days.

What is to prevent any of us to-day from staying up as late as we please, from loving as extravagantly as we please, from saying or writing whatever seems to us interesting? And doesn't it become something of a bore to watch people always being "recklessly clever"? Why can't we too be "personal and direct"? And as for the dread phantom of the death of our society, is there no satisfaction in working for a better one? Haven't young writers always spent a lot of time and print arguing with one another, and have they always had the prospect of easy jobs before they could write?

Every so often some Jeremiah, even more discouraged than Mr. Wilson, rises to proclaim that the novel is doomed, that the art of fiction is exhausted, and is due to be superseded in popular favour by other forms. Recently it was suggested that the personal record of actual life experience, employing something of the technique of fiction, was soon destined to take its place. It is true, of course, that life in our time has yielded personal histories of absorbing interest, but it seems fair to surmise that it is chiefly the appeal of their material which has found them so many readers. They may rival fiction in popular interest, but they can never displace it, for biography and autobiography, however skilled and whatever their content, cannot give what the novel is capable of giving.

As E. M. Forster once observed, human intercourse, as soon as we look at it for its own sake and not as a social adjunct, is seen to be haunted by a spectre. We cannot understand each other, except in a rough and ready way; we cannot reveal our-

selves, even when we want to; what we call intimacy is only a makeshift; perfect knowledge is an illusion. But in the novel we can know people perfectly, and, apart from the general pleasure of reading, we can find here a compensation for their dimness in life. In this fiction is truer than history, because it goes beyond the evidence, and each of us knows from his own experience that there is something beyond the evidence, and even if the novelist has not got it correctly, well—he has tried.

Possibly, too, this explains the lessening appeal which fiction has for so many people as they grow older. As their own life-experience grows, though they may still find human behaviour a puzzling business, they have at least learned enough not to be as easily satisfied as they once were by the novelist's assumption of knowledge. At least they will not be satisfied except by a writer who has arrived at a maturity of outlook which is at least the equal of their own.

The Victorian novelists traded more heavily than our own on the reader's readiness to accept their say-so; that was an amiable practice in which they, and some of their predecessors, engaged, of rounding off a tale by reassuring their readers as to what turn of fortune was the ultimate fate of the book's characters. They took it for granted that if they had succeeded in the course of several hundred pages in holding your interest, it was only fair that you should know how everything worked out for everybody in the end. This may not have been, and frequently was not, art, but it was an engaging response to a quite normal human curiosity.

And so they would tell you, in a concluding chapter, that old Mr. Forbush, having had more than his share of the vicissitudes of life, is quite content now to watch the days go by, as he meditatively smokes his pipe in front of the rose-embowered cottage where he lives with Emily. And she, the ever-dutiful daughter, tranquil now after the turbulent years of her unhappy love for Richard, finds solace in gently ministering to every need of her ageing father. As for that scheming and heartless creature, Lucy Snodgrass, she has long since seen the error of her ways, and

though she will never be truly happy, she finds some ease for her conscience in numberless little acts of charity, once so foreign to her nature.

There was thus seldom any doubt in a reader's mind as to the just and comforting dispensations of Providence. There were no tantalizing uncertainties left to the imagination. Life itself might be unfair and full of unresolved difficulties, but when you opened your novel, you could be reasonably sure that whatever good or evil was done, it would be requited, and that the author would take you fully into his confidence before he had finished.

Then, too, he never left you in any doubt as to what he, personally, thought of the antics of these human beings he had created for your entertainment and instruction. If there was ever any danger of your missing the point or of being confused over the rights and wrongs involved in a specific situation, he was always ready with a little homily to settle your mind for you and set your feet on the right path. There was no mistaking the scorn with which he depicted villainy, no question of his appreciation of the upright and just.

But just try to find out what the average contemporary novelist thinks of his characters and how they conduct themselves! He would sooner admit you to full knowledge of his secret opinion of himself. If you are an autobiographer, you are at liberty to indicate frankly your considered opinion of your sisters and your cousins and your aunts, to say nothing of that totally uninhibited grandmother of yours who was given to racing stark naked through the streets of her native village, but if you are writing about people who supposedly are living inside your own head, it is now the accepted practice to present them as objectively as possible. It is very bad form for the novelist to prejudice your mind towards his characters by any asides of his own.

Perhaps the modern method more often succeeds in giving the illusion of life, of being an actual segment of experience, and yet some of the old masters of fiction didn't do so badly in that respect, in spite of all their moralizing, and all the guide-posts

which they set up for the reader. What have we produced with more of the juice of life in it than flows through the pages of *Tom Jones*, even though Fielding repeatedly halts his story to mount the pulpit or the lecture platform? Thackeray was an incorrigible commentator on the story he was telling, yet is there a woman in all the fiction which has followed him who is more real to us than Becky Sharp?

Perhaps there was more to the method of the Victorians than merely a mode which was expected and popular. They were, of course, often burdened by the belief that art must append a moral, but it seems fair to keep in mind also that they, more often than ourselves, knew just what they believed and why. The lines of conduct were more clearly drawn and there was more general agreement about ethical values. Too often, in reading a novel to-day, we find ourselves wondering what is the author's point of view, or whether he has one. We may find pages of theorizing by his characters about a variety of extraneous subjects, views on anything from bureaucracy through marriage to the constitution of the solar system, but no deeply felt or reasoned attitude towards this central business of living in which his people are purportedly engaged. Maybe we need a little of the stiffening which the Victorians too bountifully supplied.

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